WESTERN ACTION

SEPT.

15¢

THE WOLF OF WILDCAT MOUNTAIN

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
by Oscar J. Friend

STEEL WEST-- WITH SIXGUNS!

by Lee Floren

GUNSMOKE AND DYNAMITE

by C. H. Cogswell

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS WITH WARD'S FORMULA

NOTHING, ***Absolutely nothing known to Science can do more to***

SAVE YOUR HAIR

Beware of your itchy scalp, hair loss, dandruff, head scales, unpleasant head odors! Nature may be warning you of approaching baldness. Heed Nature's warning! Treat your scalp to scientifically prepared Ward's Formula.

Millions of trouble-breeding bacteria, living on your sick scalp (see above) are killed on contact. Ward's Formula kills not one, but *all four* types of these destructive scalp germs now recognized by many medical authorities as a significant cause of baldness. Kill these germs—don't risk letting them kill your hair growth.

Proof! We get letters like these every day from grateful men and women all over the world

ENJOY THESE 5 BENEFITS IMMEDIATELY

1. Kills these 4 types of germs that retard normal hair growth—*on contact*
2. Removes ugly infectious dandruff—*fast*
3. Brings hair-nourishing blood to scalp—*quickly*
4. Stops annoying scalp itch and burn—*instantly*
5. Starts wonderful self-massaging action—*within 3 seconds*

Once you're bald, that's *it*, friends! There's nothing you can do. Your hair is gone forever. So are your chances of getting it back. But Ward's Formula, used as directed, keeps your sick scalp free of itchy dandruff, seborrhea, and stops the hair loss they cause. Almost at once your hair looks thicker, more attractive and alive.

We don't ask you to believe *us*. Thousands of men and women—first skeptical just as you are—have *proved* what we say. Read *their* grateful letters. Study the guarantee—it's *better* than a free trial! Then try Ward's Formula at *our* risk. Use it for only 10 short days. You must enjoy *all* the benefits we claim—or we return not only the price you pay—but DOUBLE YOUR MONEY BACK. You be the judge!©Ward Laboratories, Inc., 1430 Bdw'y St., New York 18 N. Y.

TO SAVE YOUR HAIR ACT NOW
Send coupon today for 10-day offer. Send No Money

I must admit I didn't have much faith in it, but I hadn't been using Ward's one week before I could see it was helping me. I could feel my hair getting thicker.
E. K., Cleveland, Ohio

Out of all the Hair Experts I went to, I've gotten the *most* help from one bottle of Ward's Formula.
C. La M., Philadelphia, Pa.

After using Ward's for only 12 days, my hair has stopped falling out.
R. W. C., Cicero, Ill.

I am tickled to death with the results. In just two weeks' time—*no dandruff!* *W. T. W., Portola, Cal.*

I feel encouraged to say that the infuriating scalp itch which has bothered me for 5 years is now gone.
J. M. K., Columbus, Ohio

Guarantee

This written guarantee entitles you not only to return of price paid for Ward's Formula, but Double Your Money Back unless you actually SEE, FEEL and ENJOY all benefits herein claimed in only ten days. The test is at our risk. All you do is return unused portion or the empty bottle unless completely satisfied.

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WESTERN ACTION

VOLUME 14 SEPTEMBER, 1950 NUMBER 6

Feature Novel

THE WOLF OF WILDCAT MOUNTAIN
..... Oscar J. Friend 8

A hopeless coward, flung on his own in the rough-and-ready West, Rufus Rundell almost welcomes the violent death he fears from every side. But Charles Burton, rancher, sees something in Rundell that escapes others, and plunges him into deadly peril in a desperate hope of awakening the man sleeping within this frightened boy.

Short Stories

GUNSMOKE AND DYNAMITE .. C. H. Cogswell 79

Jim Evans lets himself be drawn into a trap to protect the well-meaning brother of the girl he loves.

STEEL WEST — WITH SIXGUNS! ... Lee Floren 82

Hank Tarney finds he cannot escape the past, can't throw off the brand of jailbird. So, why not live up to his name?

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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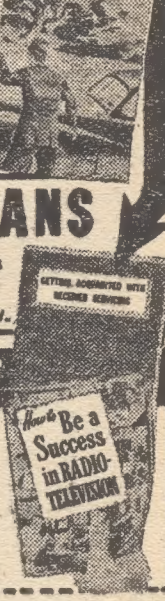

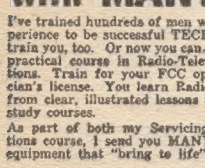

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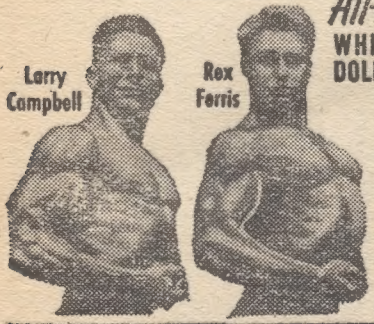

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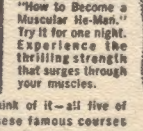

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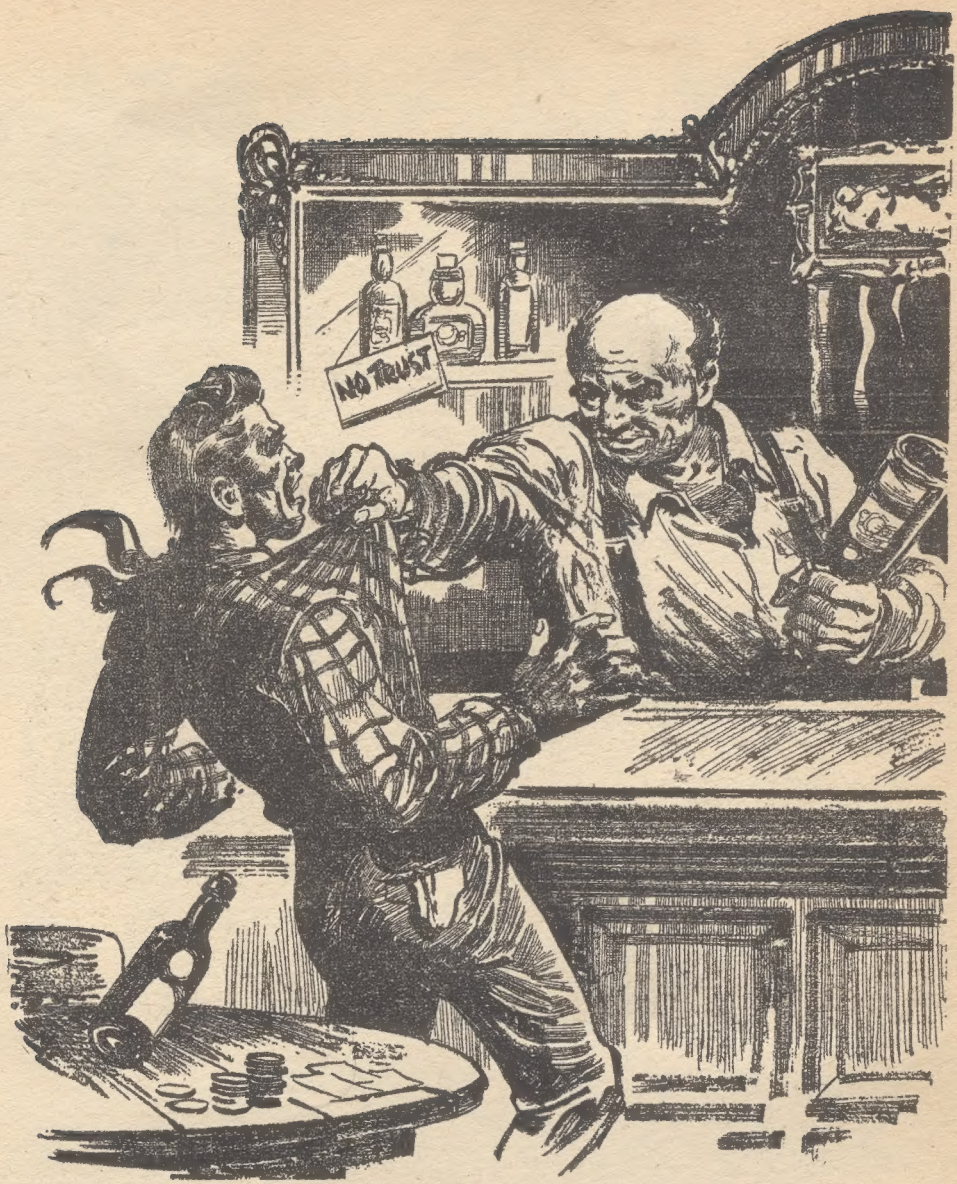


The bar-keep seized Rufus' shirt and pulled him closer. "Spit it out, now! What d'yuh want?"

the WOLF of Wildcat Mountain

Feature Novel

by Oscar J. Friend

(author of "The Bullet Eater")

He was a coward, a craven coward and he knew it, despised himself for it. And here in the West, Rufus Rundell found himself the prey of every bully and schemer who saw a use for a man who dared not fight back. Yet, Sue Burton still hoped that some day . . .

TO RUFUS RUNDELL the long train ride from New York to the unknown West was unutterly dreary. When he had crossed the Mississippi he decided to go on from there as a cowpuncher should —but he had not intended to get lost in Oklahoma.

Riding along now on his saddle mount, and with a pack horse behind, Rundell wouldn't know where he was this minute if he hadn't run across

a queer character back in the trail, driving a herd of cows.

* * *

Lee Grover, the man called himself; his eyes were a steady blue, and his weather-beaten face seamed with lines of kindness as well as exposure. Except for his Stetson, much like Rufus' own, he looked more like a farmer than a cattleman, in his faded overalls.

"Son, it's mighty plain yuh don't know where yuh are. Why, jest ten mile ahead o' here is Juarez."

"Juarez?" Rufus repeated uncertainly. "I thought that was in Old Mexico."

"This is little Juarez I'm referrin' to—th' town on th' border line o' three counties. A cross-section o' hell!"

Rufus frowned. "It isn't on my map."

"Yuh'll find it on th' map o' th' infernal regions," averred Grover grimly. "Bad actors; bad whiskey; bum Indians, bum hotel. No law, no nothin'. On th' edge o' uh piece o' desert a-fryin' in th' sun. Uh moonshiner's paradise. No revenuer dares show his nose within twenty mile o' th' place. Outside o' th' desert they's uh few wild mountains an' some scrub timber. That's Juarez. An' th' last place in th' United States for uh —er—tourist—like you to go."

"Are you trying to kid me, friend?" Rufus laughed. "Are you trying to scare me with a story of a wild and bloody town of years ago? Do I look that green? Why, you don't even carry a gun."

"Yuh jest think I don't," informed Grover with a grunt, producing a six-shooter from some recess in his overalls with a deftness which told more than the presence of the gun itself.

"Yuh see?" he remarked darkly. "Now I could jest relieve yuh o' yore hosses an' stuff and set yuh loose afoot, or I could let daylight through yuh an' leave yuh over in one o' them ditches for th' buzzards. An' I could git a tidy sum for yore hosses in Juarez."

Rufus paled slightly, and his eyes widened. "But the law!" he exclaimed. "You'd be arrested within twenty-four hours."

"I doubt it; I might be caught some day—an' again I might not. They ain't no law hereabouts. That's what I'm tryin' to tell yuh. Anyhow, where'd you be?"

"I hope you *are* joking," Rufus remarked fervently.

Grover laughed. "I am," he said. "Killin' an' robbery ain't in my line. But it's uh prosperous business in this country an' yuh're headed fer th' shoppin' center. That's why yuh shouldn't go on. Yuh fool, turn around an' git back; dust while th' dustin's good."

"What are you doing here in such a rough country?" Rufus demanded keenly.

GROVER'S eyes studied his questioner for a space. "That's uh mighty personal question, brother; but I don't believe yuh mean to be inquisitive, so I'll tell yuh. In th' fust place, I ain't so slow with this li'l flame-thrower myself; in th' second place, hereabouts is 'bout th' only spot where I can make good likker 'thought Government interference. I deal in cows an' corn. I let Juarez be—except to sell th' *Busy Bee* all th' likker I make—an' they let me be."

He restored his weapon to his overalls and brought out a plug of chewing tobacco, offered it to Rufus with an air of courtesy. At the young man's refusal he bit down on the plug twice, cutting off a wad which Rufus thought was big enough for a horse.

"You—you—I suppose you couldn't take me in for the night?" Rufus asked hesitantly.

"Nope. Yuh don't expect me to take yuh over to examine my private distillery, do yuh?"

"Perhaps not; but in that case I'll have to go on to Juarez."

Grover shrugged, started to go on, then came back to Rundell. "Yuh set on ridin' on, 'stead o' turnin' back?" he had queried.

"I have to; I'm out of even coffee and bacon."

"Well," offered Grover, "since yuh're hell-bent on destruction I'll tell yuh what to do. Head straight

for th' *Busy Bee* before anybody mixes with yuh. Call for Salty Sam Hatfield. He used to salt mines, but now he salts down anybody who gits fresh with him. Tell him that Corn Grover sent yuh, an' to take care o' yuh till yuh can ride in th' mornin'. An', boy, keep goin'. If Dude Dick Burleigh or Buffalo Jones is in town an' git their hooks in yuh—good night! I reckon yuh don't need worry 'bout th' Wolf. He's away."

With a wave of his hand he was away. Rufus rode on.

* * *

The sun had set by this time, and dusk was at his heels. Soon lights winked into being before him. He rode down a long hill to the one and only street in the town. Overhead, stars began to pierce the curtain of night; somewhere in the distance sounded the lonesome whistle of a locomotive. At his feet lay Juarez; beyond, night had shut down on the desert.

There seemed to be only two buildings in Juarez which rose to the height of two stories—the *Pisa House*, a wooden structure; and the *Busy Bee*, the only brick building in town. Rufus dismounted tied his horses to a hitchrack and, with his newly acquired warbag, entered the hotel instead of the *Busy Bee*.

On entering the hotel Rufus Rundell realized that the less said about the appointments of the place, the kinder. On the first floor were the lobby, the dining room and cafe, and the kitchen. He figured fifteen or twenty small sleeping rooms upstairs. The floor was covered with worn linoleum; everything was covered with dirt.

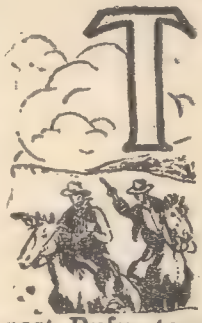
The lobby was deserted save for Amos Gelding, the proprietor. Supper was over except for one burly individual being waited on by a drap waitress. As Rufus approached the desk he observed that Gelding's eyes were hard and suspicious. He also was obese and garrulous.

"Yep," he said to his guest, "I can put yuh up for th' night. Yuh had supper? No? Well, yuh better hoof it into th' dinin' room an' belly uh table. I feed 'em here an' Salty Sam likkers 'em across th' street. Jest leave yore warbag here at th' desk. I'll have yore hosses looked after... Yuh got special business here in town?"

"Y-yes," Rufus agreed. "Don't yuh ever have transients here?"

"None whatesoever," commented Gelding. "No foreigners, I mean." He heard the fat man add half to himself, "No transoms an' no dudes, either."

2



THE SOLITARY occupant of the dining room was seated a number of tables away from the spot chosen by Rufus Rundell. Between great mouthfuls of food the fellow was watching the hotel entrance and shooting sharp glances past Rufus toward the front door of the restaurant. Once when the waitress came up suddenly behind him he almost whirled upon her before he caught himself. His eyes were as hard as the landlord's.

Having given his order to the girl, Rufus settled back in his chair to wait. A vast bulk loomed before him. "Nellie got yore order?" queried the hotel man. He jerked a fat thumb at the aproned girl who floated listlessly about like a disembodied spirit.

Rufus nodded.

"That's good. We generally can fix up all but th' most fasteedious eaters. I do more feedin' than sleepin' business here."

"Don't you have many overnight guests? I judge this is the only hotel in Juarez."

"Oh, yeah." Gelding pulled out a chair and straddled it, resting his fat arms and double chin on the back. "Take that feller behind me now. He'll probably stay here tonight if he don't git too drunk to find his way back. He come in from his farm this afternoon to irrigate his inner linin'."

"He doesn't look like a farmer."

"Oh, he's kinda new at it—took it up recent since robbin' uh mail train over near Little Rock. I got two or three steady boarders who work here in town. " 'Cases Jim' th' faro dealer for th' 'Garden o' Delight'—that's part o' the *Busy Bee*—stays here... What d'yuh say was yore business here?

"I—I don't believe I said," returned Rufus a trifle unsteadily.

Gelding smiled genially. "Most o' th' drunks manage to make it here before they collapse, but sometimes they sleep it off one place or another. Otherwise, they don't stay here 'cause they don't live in town. Those what live here in Juarez mostly boards or has a house o' their own... Want some more water? Hey, Nellie! Another glass o' water. I git quite a few o' thuh boys shot, too."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, *that*." Gelding shrugged with such sublime indifference that his chair creaked alarmingly. "Whenever anybody collects uh slug they bring 'im here where's they's uh bed to lay 'im. Sometimes they git well an' sometimes they don't—but I git th' business."

"Do you actually mean that men shoot each other hereabouts as often as that?"

"Oh, it's not so bad," defended Gelding. "We have plenty shootin's, but only one or two killin's per month."

Rufus could only stare with slack jaw.

"Yes, sir," Gelding went on, slapping one huge, hairy hand with the fat palm of the other, "here th' only ones who get perforated have it comin'. They're bad actors, generally. No, sir, nobody killed here is missed or mourned by th' healthy remainder."

Rufus winced at how well that remark fitted him.

"Nevertheless," resumed Gelding gently, "I don't wanta give yuh th' idee that Juarez is uh hell-roarin' community. It ain't. Most o' th' shootin' is done under th' influence o' excitement an' likker. 'Course, they's two or three real vicious homr bres 'round like Dude Dick. Yuh ever hear o' Dude Dick Burleigh? No, I don't 'spose yuh have—bein' uh stranger. Well, Dick is uh handsome devil. I heard he was uh doctor an' got chased out here 'cause he cut up his wife an' burned her in th' furnace. I dunno, but he shore is uh mean baby to fool with. As for th' Wolf—my Gawd! He even scares me. Lucky he don't come to town often.

"There may be one or two more yuh can't trifle with—like Salty Sam an' Corn Grover an' Amos Geldin' which is myself. But I'm easy to get along with. 'Course it's only when th' boys are drunk that accidents happen. Yuh ought to meet Buffalo Jones. Never killed nobody in his life while he's sober, but he likes to joke an' poke fun at folks. He gets mighty tiresome sometimes, but shucks! He's as harmless as uh kitten. I remember one time... Hello, here's yore supper. Nellie, here, is my niece, so don't go makin' any eyes at her." Gelding winked broadly. "Nellie, this here is Mr. Runt—Rundell, Rundell. He's stayin' with us tonight."

Rufus arose and acknowledged the crude introduction. The girl's eyes

widened in pleased surprise.

"Set down an' eat yore supper," Gelding admonised. "Ain't yuh never seen uh female before?"

UPON CLOSER inspection Nellie was not as lifeless and drab as she had seemed. A little powder and a frilly frock would have transformed her.

"Get some bread, Nellie," ordered her uncle. Then, as the girl obediently moved away: "She come to me from Kansas. I've had her since she was twelve. Her ma took out with uh half-breed Injun. Lafe, my brother, died with his boots on—some fool shootin' scrape over crops, so I heard. I never went up to investigate. Lafe was always quarrelsome. Th' law turned th' other fellow loose, so I know it was all right."

Rufus almost choked. Gelding gave him a sharp glance then resumed his flow of words. "Lafe didn't leave nothin', so I had 'em send Nellie on to me. I've had her ever since. She's uh good girl—lots o' help. Th' *Pisa House* shore would miss her if she was to git married. She don't seem to cotton to any o' th' men hereabouts, though. Acts kinda draggy. Guess she needs uh spring tonic. I'll have Doc Lake fix her up some sarsaparilllee."

Gelding paused for breath and frowned as he noted he had lost his guest's attention. He hitched his chair forward with a prolonged creak. But Rufus had forgotten him; he was staring in apprehension over the corpulent man's shoulder. Gelding turned his head to learn the reason for his inattention.

A short-set man of huge shoulders and powerful frame stood in the opening leading to the lobby. He was not a dwarf, but he was astonishingly short in cubits for the build of his body. His features were practically indistinguishable because of the massive beard which engulfed his countenance.

The burly uneasy man eating had ceased to ply his knife and fork; he leaped to his feet, overturning his chair with a crash. The man in the doorway shook his shaggy head like an angry bull.

"Yeh, Pete Turner," he bellowed savagely, "I been lookin' fer yuh!"

"An' I been waitin' fer you," growled the man called Turner.

FOR A fat man Gelding displayed surprisingly agility. He was on his feet and facing the two belligerents before Turner's chair hit the floor. "No rough stuff in my house," he grated harshly. "I ain't goin' to have my furniture broke up."

He was ignored.

"Damn yuh, Turner!" the hairy man bawled. "How come them target steers are on my place after I told yuh I wouldn't touch *them* cows for nothin'? Yuh fool, go right now an' turn them cattle back where yuh got 'em!"

Turner settled himself more firmly on his feet. "We're in cahoots on this work, Jones; you ain't quittin' me—now. Go home—p r o n t o!—an tend to them steers, yuh hoss thief!"

"*Hoss* thief?" Jones bellowed. "Don't call me no hoss thief, yuh cattle rustler!" The huge, squat man hurled himself after his own epithet, straight at the defamer of his honor.

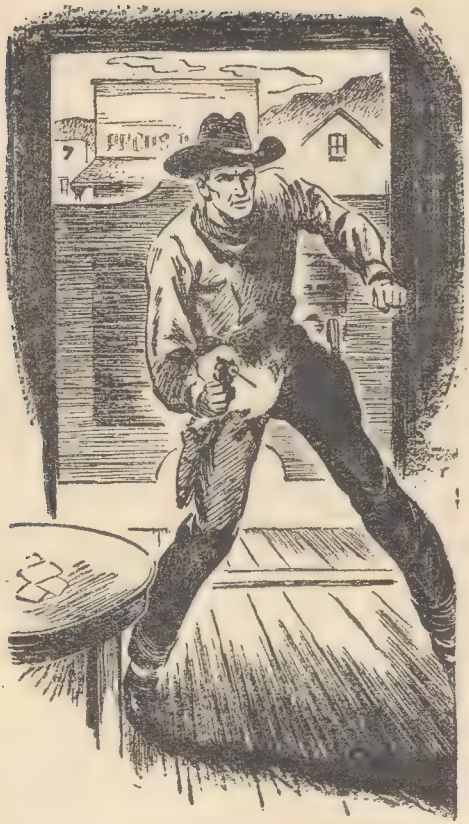
The waitress squeaked and fled for the kitchen. Turner made a swift snatch at his boot top. He came erect with a revolver in his hand.

"Damn yuh, Jones!" he grated. "Yuh can't buffalo me, an' yuh're goin' to stick to our little business. Yuh bawlin' idjut, go home an' hide them—"

But the rest of his remarks were lost as the bewhiskered avalanche charged into him. One massive hand clamped down and fairly wrung the weapon from him just as he pulled the trigger. The report deafened young Rundell as the leaden slug buried itself in the wall somewhere near him.

With a howl of pain Turner drew back his left arm to strike. Before he could land the blow his own gun crashed into his mouth, butt foremost. One instant those coarse lips were awry in a savage leer; the next they were a bloody ruin.

Turner screamed as he spat out splinters of teeth and staggered back.



Regaining his balance, he delivered a swift kick which caught the shorter man in the pit of the stomach. It would have doubled up an ordinary man and turned him purple.

Not so "Buffalo" Jones. He grunted and swayed, but managed to retain his balance by dropping Turner's gun and clutching the man's raised foot with both hands. Whirling about, he hoisted the leg over one vast shoulder. He heaved.

Turner flew over his head and crashed onto the floor at the landlord's feet. His forehead struck the flooring with a resounding *thwack* and he sprawled out, limp and still. Rufus shuddered convulsively, that wild scream of agony still echoing in his ears.

Gelding rolled the victim over. "Good fer th' night," he estimated.

"Sorry to bother yuh, Amos," grunted the hairy Hercules. "Jest uh li'l personal matter 'twixt me an' Turner."

"Yuh had ought to be more considerate," Gelding flung at him. "Yuh might of done some damage."

The door to the street slammed, and the landlord gathered up the badly-used Turner.

"My Gawd!" chattered Rufus. "Who—what—who was that?"

"Him? Oh, nobody but Buffalo Jones. He's kinda boisterous sometimes." Gelding started for the stairway. "See yuh after I carry Turner up to bed."

But he did not see Rufus Rundell upon coming back downstairs. Rufus had bolted, hatless and shameless, in search of Salty Sam Hatfield.

3

SIX MILES north of Juarez rose a twisted group of hills known as Wildcat Mountain. By trail the distance was nearer twelve miles because of the wildness of vegetation and the canyons and coulees.

Wildcat Mountain gazed down upon the encroaching desert, challenging any traveler to penetrate its secrets. To the south lay Juarez, but to the north these frowning hills looked down upon a fertile cattle country. Folks there were too busy to explore a mountain reputed to be infested with dangerous game, both two-legged and four-legged.

Toward the eastern slope of this mountain Lee Grover followed in the wake of his cattle into fine, smooth country up the valley. Gleaming faintly through the dusk at the base of Wildcat Mountain, stood a cluster of white buildings. Fine, clean corrals, a silo, a dam which confined the waters of a creek, and a beautiful house of native red and brown stone.

Grover had been born and bred in this country, knew more about it than any settler. He could remember when this valley had been a nest for outlaws, and he been a deputy marshal.

Charles Burton had descended on this land from some place up North, and with nothing but his two hands and determination had wrought one miracle after another. Grover had seen him under a wide variety of conditions since that day when he had found him half-dead from fatigue and thirst at the edge of the desert, with a little girl in his arms. How he got there, Grover had never learned; save that Burton was the father of the little girl and a widower, Grover knew nothing of his past. But men were judged by what they did, and not by what they had been.

A more adamant, unswerving man than Burton, Grover had never met. He used people as stepping stones to his ambitions. Friends he had not wanted, except the man who had saved his life. And he cherished his daughter with a fierce love.

He was fair, scrupulously so, but he never relinquished what he had won.

What Burton wanted, he got. He made grass grow where none had grown before. He forced an orchard to thrive. He wanted good cattle, so he bred them himself. He wanted luxuries, so he built a road and brought in supplies and building materials. He needed water, so he built a dam. Today, the most powerful man in the country, he owned cattle lands and oil lands. And he brought civilization to him.

"Desperadoes will bother me but once," he had once said, succintly. And that remark had been prophetic. The denizens of Wildcat Mountain and the country surrounding Juarez shunned this valley like a plague spot.

It was true that Lee Grover was a manufacturer of moonshine and a purveyor of it in Juarez, but whenever he turned his hand to livestock he was working for Charles Burton. The cattle he now herded up the valley bore the Target brand of the Burton ranch. That they had made their way unaided out of the sheltered valley and into the vicinity of the home of Buffalo Jones was unthinkable. Buffalo Jones knew better than to look twice at any Burton stock. Grover had pursued the cattle and had been calmly turning them back home when he had met young Rundell, the first human being he had sighted within miles of the steers.

REACHING the Burton headquarters, Grover projected his angular form through the doorway of the chuckhouse before the punchers had finished supper.

"Keep right on h'istin' th' vittles, boys," he said. "After supper, though, a couple o' yuh better fork yore broncs an' ride down th' valley lookin' for cut fences. I jest herded some twenty steers home that I found headin' south. No fireworks. They was alone an' I brung 'em back."

"Set down an' jine us, Lee?" invited Williams, the foreman.

Grover declined. "Reckon I'll mosey on up to th' big house an' confab with Burton. He's home, ain't he?"

"Yes," responded Williams. "Much obliged for bringin' th' dogies back home, Lee."

As Grover climbed the stone steps of the ranchhouse he heard a violin. Queer little thrills ran up and down the old plainsman's spine. It was through the violin that Burton spoke of many things he never mentioned with his voice. Grover always felt drawn closer to the man yet, paradoxically, more remote.

Until Burton began to talk to him. Then the room, dignified and stately, became warm, friendly—comfortable.

Burton looked up as Grover entered. A smile appeared on his lips and a light kindled in his eyes. He laid his violin and bow on the grand piano and came forward. "My friend," he said simply, but Grover warmed, hearing this magnetic man call him "friend," although there was never any condescension in Burton's manner.

"Yuh're feelin' blue again," accused Grover. "Somethin' happen to rile yuh up?"

"No," denied Burton, his smile taking a hint of sadness. "But there

are times when your mind is in a turmoil. Some men go out and shoot up the town. I play the violin; it is safer."

"There are things in my life I wouldn't like to live over," Grover rejoined soberly. "But *I* generally get to feelin' blue in the fall. Spring ain't rightly the time for it."

"But it was at about this time, twenty years ago, that I lost all, except my daughter and my honor," said Burton.

"Oh!" said Grover, and fell silent.

"But we are living in the present, Lee, not the past," Burton went on with a change of air. "You are just in time for supper. Sit down and tell me what you have been doing."

"I been runnin' uh big order o' stuff for Hatfield," Grover commented. "An' this evenin' I run into some monkey business."

"You're not in trouble?" Burton demanded quickly.

"Over my corn likker?" snorted Grover. "Humph! I reckon not. There's worse snake poison than mine all over th' country for th' Government to worry 'bout. If I didn't supply Hatfield somebody else would make him somethin' worse. Nope, what I was goin' to tell yuh was that I found uh bunch o' Target steers 'way over by Buffalo Jones' place. I jest brought 'em home."

"Just what do you mean, Lee?"

Grover gave him a detailed account. "I didn't see anything suspicious except that yore cattle was in th' wrong place. I didn't hunt for any sign on that range. An' I come back uh different way. But I know them steers didn't stray off across that rough country thataway. Well—draw yore own conclusions like I done."

Not a muscle quivered in Burton's face as he gazed into the fire. "I hardly think Buffalo Jones could be so foolish," he said thoughtfully. "Still, human nature is an enigma. Is Jones hard up for money?"

"No diff'rent than usual," Grover answered. "He's still tradin' hosses."

"I have had no trouble with Juarez for about ten years," Burton estimated.

"Since the Wolf come to this country," agreed Grover. "He shore has give Juarez plenty to think about. He's run most o' th' bad uns offen Wildcat Mountain." Grover inquired suddenly: "Has he ever bothered you any?"

"To the best of my knowledge he has never set foot in this valley. Have you ever run across him in the hills?"

"Nope. Only in Juarez. That was enough."

"About those runaway steers of mine," resumed the ranch owner. "Perhaps there are some new arrivals in the Juarez country who cannot distinguish between brands?"

"Well," commented Grover, "this here feller Dick Burleigh ain't been here more'n two or three years. But cattle wouldn't interest him none. His speciality is women."

"He's supposed to have murdered his wife, isn't he? A renegade professional man?"

"Doctor," grunted Grover. "It wouldn't surprise me none if it's true. He knows medicine an' doctorin'."

A GIRL'S voice called from the doorway leading into the dining room: "Supper, Dad!... Why Uncle Lee! I didn't know you were here!"

As the girl advanced into the room, as usual, Grover caught his breath. Sue Burton had her father's expressive eyes and strength of character, and a delicate beauty. "Of course you'll stay for supper," she said warmly.

"Well," drawled Grover, a twinkle in his eyes, "I'm powerful glad to be able to accommodate yuh."

The three of them repaired to the dining room. "You mentioned Burleigh, Lee," remarked Burton. "Who else is new in Juarez to be considered?"

"Well, there's a feller named Turner," replied Grover. "From what I've heard, he ain't in any pressin'

need o' funds. But he's th' sort who would likely do things like this."

"Like what?" Sue asked.

"Rustlin' cattle."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Trouble again?"

"I think not, dear." Her father smiled. "Cattle don't stray from this valley but once. Anyone else, Lee?"

Grover frowned thoughtfully. "Nope. None foolish enough to meddle 'round here... They *is* uh stranger, too. I run across uh young feller this afternoon. From N'York—wantin' to see th' West—ridin' hossback. Said his name was Rundell—Rufus Rundell. He was lost an' I... What's th' matter, Charlie? You sick?"

Burton's face had gone white to the lips and his eyes burned into those of Grover with a painful intensity. "Wh-what was that name?"

"Rundell," answered Grover in slight perplexity. "Uh plumb stranger. Had uh likable sort o' face. I met him jest as I was crossin' th' trail with th' steers. 'Course he didn't have nothin' to do with liftin' 'em."

Father and daughter eyed each other. Slowly the color came back to Burton's face. "And you sent him on into Juarez, Lee?"

"Sent him on?" cried the old man indignantly. "I done my durnedest to send him on th' back trail, but he insisted on goin' ahead."

"A Rundell characteristic," murmured Burton, half under his breath.

"Eh?" inquired Grover doubtfully.

Burton rose abruptly from the table.

"Father?" Sue cried, leaping to her feet. "What are you going to do?"

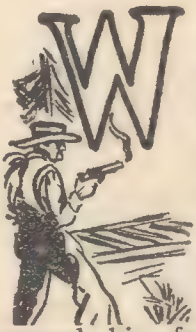
"I hardly know," remarked Burton slowly. "But I must go after this man."

"I am going with you," Sue declared instantly.

Burton slowly sank back into his chair. "Very well, my dear. But there is no hurry. Ring for Verna to bring in hot rolls."

The meal was resumed. But Grover noticed that his host had lost his appetite.

4



WILD-EYED and pale, Rufus Rundell all but fell against the door of the *Busy Bee*—and the door was locked; the *Busy-Bee* was closed for the night. Several rough-looking individuals ogled him curiously as he pressed his face against the unwashed pane of glass and tried to peer into the store.

The doorway to the dance hall was open and in the light Rufus saw a man moving about in the dim interior. He rattled the door-knob desperately. Without deigning to look up the fellow motioned toward the "Garden of Delight." Rufus shout-

ed frenziedly.

"Go to th' other door!" bawled the man within. "Wot th' hell."

The "Garden of Delight" was well-lighted, conducive to accuracy in gun-fighting—or manipulating cards and poker chips. Two bartenders at the long bar were busily quenching the drought which seemed to have settled in some fifteen or twenty throats. At a table in a corner four men, sat playing stud poker while a fifth man in shirt sleeves dealt and dragged a blue chip out of every pot. In time the "kitty" would eat up all the stakes in the game, aided by the impersonal hand of the wooden-faced dealer. At another table a man with a green eye-shade monotonously dealt faro for a lone player.

Women with painted faces and attired in costumes ranging from the musical comedy chorus to evening dress, danced with clumsy or agile partners to the strains of a discordant piano operated by a dish-faced gentleman. All was laughter, noise, smoke, and fumes of strong drink. A touch of grim realism was added by the ruddy and mustached person, with a shotgun across his knees, who sat in a straight chair on the end of the bar overlooking the card games.

How he navigated the whirling dancers and reached the entrance to the Busy Bee Rufus never knew. He sighed in vast relief as he put one foot across the threshold.

"Hey, you!" bellowed a harsh voice. *"Wherenhell yuh think yuh're goin'?"*

Rufus halted. Ugly visages leered at him from the line of men at the bar, and a bartender glowered at him.

"Well?" the barkeep demanded belligerently.

"I—uh—that is, Mr.—er—Hat... I was—" Rufus gulped, motioning toward the *Busy Bee* with one limp hand.

"C'mere an' tell me," the bartender rasped.

Rufus slowly complied; at the end of the counter he met the fierce gaze of his inquisitor.

The bar-keep siezed Rufus' shirt and pulled him closer. "Spit it out, now! What d'yuh want?"

"Mr. Hatfield," Rufus stammered. I am looking for Mr. Hatfield."

"*Busy Bee's* closed for th' night," declared the barkeeper as he eyed young Rundell up and down. "Still, if yuh want to buy uh hat or somethin', th' clerk's still in there."

"No, I want Mr. Hatfield, please."

"Gone to supper," ripped out the bartender shortly. "Yuh'll have to wait."

Rufus almost collapsed; he swayed, and caught at the bar for support. The bartender leaned far over the counter to say something—but it was never said. There was a bull-like roar from the man next to Rufus, and simultaneously he hurled his glass—a water glass—and its contents full at the bartender's head. The glass shattered squarely between the man's eyes, the pale liquid running with blood down both sides of his nose.

"Damn, yuh, Pete!" roared the irate hurler. "I told yuh I wanted good whisky, not bum corn with lye!"

RUFUS WAS hurled back by the mighty shoulders of the very man who had startled him in the hotel. In high rage Buffalo Jones plowed his way through the dancing couples and out of the place.

The bartender sprawled across the bar, crashing to the floor, and began to scream. A crowd collected about the man on the floor, buffeting Rufus roughly. Other sounds died away at the shrieks of the man. He would let no one touch him, yet kept shouting for aid.

Rufus at last found himself on the outskirts of the crush of people. The mob had crowded him against the faro table. The man with the green eye-shade was still calling the cards in a flat, weary voice while the lone player kept cases and made his bets.

"Jack loses, trey wins," droned the dealer. "Any change of bets, Doc?"

Click! Click! The player flipped

two of the tallying beads in the case.

"Jacks all out," he announced briefly. "One more trey in the box. Deal."

And through it all the howls and curses of the injured man rang out. Finally the player raised one hand, signaling the dealer to stop. He rose quietly to his feet.

"Damn that noise!" he stated dispassionately.

He reached out and tapped a man lightly on the shoulder. The man turned a scowling face which, at sight of the faro player, melted into a fawning smile. Instantly he began shoving and clearing away those in front of him.

"Gangway!" he bawled. "Doc's comin'! Move, blast yuh!"

Swift murmurings arose, and the crowd thinned away like leaves in an autumn gale. Once more Rufus could see the man on the floor. "Get!" snapped the faro player. "All of you!"

He stooped over the agonized bartender, laid one slender white hand on his shoulder. "Lie still, you bloody fool!" he ordered sharply. "Stop that clamor!"

Pete went limp, and his howls ceased as abruptly as though "Doc" had severed his vocal cords. His sobbing breath sounded like escaping steam.

"Here, you!" Doc commanded a man crisply. "Run down to the drug store." He reeled off the order. "Charge it to Hatfield."

The fellow made off and the doctor glanced around. "One of you women get a bowl of clean, warm water," he said. "And one of you loafers run into the *Busy Bee* for a package of boric acid and some cotton."

With scarcely an effort the faro player gathered up the hulking bartender and stretched him out on the bar.

"Gawd!" whimpered the blinded man. "I can't see, Doc. Damn Buffalo Jones! Oooohhh—

"Shut up!" directed the doctor tersely as he drew a pair of tweezers from his pocket. "It's the glass you should be worrying about, man. Don't move, now! If you flinch while I'm digging out this glass I won't answer for your eyesight."

With a steady hand he began picking the splinters of glass out of the fellow's face. The clerk with the boric and the woman with a pan of water arrived.

Another bartender served drinks at the far end of the bar. But no one presumed to approach the surgeon and the supine Pete, and the poker game was not resumed for a time. So the man with the shotgun proceeded to fill and light his pipe; from his superior position he squinted down on the doctor judicially, admiring his work.

"You ought to have a couple of stitches taken in this gash between your eyes," he advised when finished. "Better get Dr. Lake to do it; I haven't any needles or ligatures. Then go home and go to bed. Drop a few drops of this solution into your eyes every fifteen or twenty minutes until tomorrow."

"But I can't see, Doc," moaned Pete brokenly.

"Somebody take him over to the hotel and put him to bed," the doctor said over his shoulder.

"I want to go home," Pete insisted. "I live jest down th' street."

"Take him home," commanded the doctor abruptly, rinsing his tweezers and his hands.

"Am I blind, Doc?" cried Pete anxiously. "Won't I ever see again? Tell me, am I ruint?"

"I have no idea," returned the doctor. "Time alone will tell. See Lake about your troubles."

PETE WAS led, groaning and mumbling, away. Rufus dropped weakly into a chair and stared in horror at the doctor. The man was clean-shaven and his thin face was almost handsome. His hair had grayed about the temples and his eyes were gray, cold, and inscrutable. His diction was perfect, his movements and actions fastidious.

Rufus was lost in a vast canvas of raw and primitive colors, too monstrous for him to comprehend. He was brought to himself by a light touch on his shoulder. A cool, quiet voice murmured: "I believe you have my chair."

The doctor with the unsmiling gray eyes was bending over him. Rufus tried to rise, but his muscles refused to respond; he could only sit and stare dumbly. For a brief space the two gazed, eye to eye, then a faint smile played about the lips of the doctor.

"You are a stranger in this rough country, as I can tell by your all too new range garb," he murmured softly. "You rode in this afternoon, registered at the *Pisa House* as being from New York?"

Rufus gulped slightly and nodded.

"Permit me to introduce myself. My name is Richard Burleigh—occasionally called 'Doc' hereabouts. I see that... Here! Quick, Jim, get him a stiff drink! The Easterner is not used to butchery; Pete's yowling and bleeding were too much for him."

Rufus Rundell had passed out; in spite of Lee Grover's advice, he had fallen into the hands of "Dude Dick" Burleigh in avoiding the merely "playful" Mr. Jones...

* * *

The following two hours were, to Rufus, the most fascinating and horrible he had ever spent. He was never able to understand how Dick Burleigh got him into that faro game.

When Rundell came to himself he found that he was playing with Burleigh and had already lost nearly four thousand dollars to the house. Burleigh had not won his money, seeming to be holding his own, merely. A curious crowd clustered about watching the fool from the East throw away his money.

Under other circumstances, Rufus might have enjoyed the game; so far as he could see it was the squarest gambling game he had ever played. But it was as if he had been wandering through a mist, to come abruptly to his senses as the dealer shoved a stack of chips across the table.

"That squares us—the last of your forty-seven hundred dollars," he droned.

"I don't understand," Rufus murmured.

"You've been playing for nearly an hour," Dick Burleigh put in gently. "Of course you put up the contents of your wallet in order to pay for the chips you have been playing."

"Put up my wallet? To *gamble?* Why—why, I don't even know how I happen to be playing. You mean to tell me that I have lost nearly four thousand dollars at this table in the last hour!

"Exactly." Burleigh smiled. "It's about time for your luck to change, isn't it?"

Rufus started to struggle to his feet. "I've been robbed!"

"Sit down!" The voice of Dick Burleigh was not loud, but was vastly significant. "You're holding up my game."

5

DUMBLY Rufus sank back into his chair. He stared foolishly at the green cloth, then looked up at the hard faces which hemmed him in. He saw no interest save in his money; he was in a den of wolves.

Glumly he placed a single chip on the six, seven, and eight.

"Deal," Burleigh murmured.

The play was resumed, with Rufus in full possession of his faculties. Once when he noticed that the ace lost three times straight as it showed in the box, he placed two hundred dollars on the ace to win. A significant look passed between Burleigh and the dealer while a murmur ran around the circle of watchers. The youngster was learning the game.

After several turns the fourth ace came up in the box.

"Ten loses, ace wins," droned the dealer, raking in a small bet Dick Burleigh had on the ten and four, and paying off Rundell's winning bet.

Half an hour passed, but the contest was too unequal. At the end of that time the dealer swept away the last of Rundell's forty-seven hundred dollars and shoved Burleigh out a stack four times the size of his bet for calling the turn. The show was over. Rufus had lost his bank roll.

"My Gawd!" he whispered. "I'm penniless. I'm stranded here in *this* place without funds."

A bewhiskered man leaned over his chair to offer advice. "Mayhap Sam Hatfield'll grubstake yuh to enough to drift on, seein's yuh lost yore wad at his table."

"Yes," Rufus cried quickly. "Sam Hatfield! He's the man I came here to see. Where is he?"

"Can't see him tonight," vetoed the dealer flatly.

"But—but I've *got* to!" Rufus cried. "You didn't leave—I mean I haven't enough left to pay the hotel. You've ruined me—robbed me!"

"Such a condition is most unfortunate," Dick Burleigh purred gently, and Rufus knew he was staring into the leering mast of robbery by law of might. Dude Dick Burleigh meant to goad him into resistance.

"For shame!" cried one of the women. "To strip a kid like that!"

Rufus heard. It merely made him choke—this sympathy.

"Well?" prompted Burleigh, "what are you going to do about it?"

The onlookers drew back precipitately. Rufus staggered erect. Burleigh rose with the lightness of a wild thing. Jim, the dealer, sat still and watched narrowly.

So far as Rufus could see, Burleigh was unarmed, and while the doctor was a well-built, active man, there was no doubt in Rundell's mind that he himself was by far the physical master of this cold-eyed demon. And if he didn't make a move he would be complacently losing every cent he had.

RUNDELL began trembling. He fought himself as he had never fought before to tear through the invisible barrier which had always held him back before another human being. If he could ever tear through that for one glorious incident...

This was not the first time he had grappled with this ghost. He was not afraid of death, nor of physical pain. His fear was always of people. It was the clash with his fellowmen which he could not whip himself to meet.

"Well?" the soft, hateful voice of his tormentor penetrated his turmoil to repeat. "What are you going to do?"

Without a word Rufus started toward the door. A way opened silently for him. To many who knew Burleigh this was wisdom and discretion. But Rufus himself knew he was deadly afraid of Dude Dick Burleigh...

Suddenly his shoulders heaved convulsively and he began to sob aloud as he made his way blindly along. He was crying, not in his terror, but because of his cowardice.

"Stop!"

He quivered to a halt. Swift, confident footsteps came up behind him. Burleigh followed him to the door.

Of all those who had witnessed this queer scene, this man had pierced Rundell's secret. Burleigh knew, and he knew that Rufus knew he knew.

"When you get out in the street," Burleigh said slowly and impressively "keep going—west." He pointed down the way where night had blotted out the desert. This was worse than death to send an unarmed man without food or water into the desert, much less a tenderfoot. It was murder.

Rufus glanced once into that mocking face, then turned obediently toward the chilling night. He realized what this meant—yet he was afraid to refuse. He stumbled off into the darkness, his horse forgotten.

There was no moon, but cold stars lit the dome of heaven until all things cast faint shadows. The desert shimmered, and each clump of sagebrush stood out like a tuft of hair on the whitened pate of a circus clown.

One would never have thought on the afternoon of a clear day that the sands could lose so much of their burning, stinging heat at night. But now all was wrapped in freezing solitude; there was a cold, piercing wind which whipped up the sand to fling it in stinging spray, which sought out every exposed thing.

BEFORE long, Rufus had lost all track of time, though it must be between midnight and dawn. He felt that he had been wandering for hours. Almost directly ahead of him shone the North Star. On his right he could dimly perceive a dark mass he knew to be mountains. For Rufus had not exactly obeyed the mandate of Dick Burleigh; he knew better than to lose himself in that waterless expanse of desert. As long as he stayed close to the mountains he would never be far from water.

He laughed aloud grimly. The wind tore the laugh from his lips derisively.

His immediate plans were to walk around the desert. Surely there would be a ranchhouse or farm where he could beg food and shelter.

Wildcat Mountain was now so close that he could see the barren face of a bluff that had withstood the action of wind and sand for centuries. Perhaps there was a little draw, a coulee, or even a hole where he would be sheltered from the plaguing gusts.

As he approached the crevice he observed a ruddy, flickering glow which danced cheerily against the opposite wall. He could hear the crackle of logs ablaze. Somebody had built a fire close to the rear wall. He stumbled over rocks and loose shale, expecting to see someone rise to investigate the noise.

Then, without warning, a voice was raised in song. Rufus stood spellbound while he listened familiar words. The song ended in a burst of wild laughter, hearty, exultant.

Rufus lost all inclination to enter the rift; he decided to investigate.

If I'm beginning to go crazy, the sooner I'll be out of misery.

He straightened his shoulders and stepped resolutely around the rock. The fire still leaped and beckoned him through a scant two-foot space. Creeping cautiously around the boulder, he blinked his eyes at the wildest-looking being he had ever seen.

The man was seated cross-legged beside the fire, gazing as straight into Rundell's face as though he had been waiting for him to appear.

A shapeless black sombrero lay on the ground. A thatch of vigorous black hair, which looked as though it had never felt a comb, bushed out above the fellow's ears and straggled across the forehead in a matted tangle. Beard covered much of the face, except for a livid scar which ran down the left cheek from eye to lip. This twisted up the cor-

ner of the cruel mouth in a set quirk.

Without placing his hands to the ground the man straightened lithely to his feet, never removing his piercing gaze from Rundell's face. Rufus dropped his eyes. And he noticed something further about the man's trousers; strapped so low on each thigh that its tip reached the knee was a holster of the same black leather. From the top of each protruded the butt of a heavy six-shooter.

As he stood erect, this man's guns were right under his loosely hanging hands. The holsters were too low to be attached to the heavy cartridge belt which girdled his waist like a corrugated palisade of leather, brass and lead. Besides being tied about the legs with buckskin thongs the gun sheaths were stitched securely to the trousers themselves.

Another unusual fact which was gradually borne in on Rufus was the sober color scheme. With the single exception of the sheep-skin jacket and his complexion everything about this individual was black. But all paled into insignificance beside the malevolent gleam in his eyes. Rufus knew that here he had stumbled onto a being who outrivaled Buffalo Jones in violence and Dude Dick Burleigh in deadliness.

Rufus fell back.

"Stop!" The man's voice was harsh, grating, not at all like his singing voice. "Come sit down!"

Rufus unwillingly entered the circle of light.

"There!" rasped the shaggy one, pointing to the corner formed by the huge boulder and the wall of the rift.

Rufus glanced toward the spot. There was room enough for him and it certainly was a cozy spot for him to warm himself. But he would be as cornered as a rat in a trap.

"There!" repeated his captor in a slightly louder voice.

"You—I—I thought I heard you singing and I looked in to see—"

"You did," the man snapped. "Sit down! You're here because I'm here—and I'm here because you're here."

Rufus sought the designated spot reluctantly. "I fail to understand," he objected. "How could you be looking for me? Who are you?"

"They call me the Wolf."

6

RUFUS Rundell's legs collapsed beneath him. He half fell to the sanded floor of the rift. The Wolf! He went off into a gale of hysterical laughter until the tears streamed down his face.

"Shut up!" rasped the Wolf, leaning forward to punch at the fire.

The sharp command sobered Rufus and brought him back to a consciousness of his position.

He now saw that on a crude tripod of iron bars over the roaring blaze was a battered coffee pot, steam arising from its spout. In a crevice stood two dented tin cups. The Wolf lifted the pot from its hook and poured the cups full of black coffee.

"Drink!" he commanded, picking up a cup himself. "Coffee."

The stuff was scalding hot and strong and bitter, but it was gratefully warming. In silence the cups were emptied.

"More?" barked the Wolf.

"Er—no, thank you," Rufus declined.

"More," decided the Wolf, reaching for the pot. "Drink!"

As a warm glow began to pervade Rufus, tiring of the Wolf's silent scrutiny of him, he looked around. At length he fell to counting the calks on the sole of his companion's boot.

"What's your name?" The Wolf barked suddenly.

"Rufus Rundell."

"What are you doing here?"

"Why, a man named Burleigh drove me out of Juarez. I was walking—"

"I know that—I saw it all," cut in the Wolf sharply. "What are you doing in this country?"

"I was on my way to live in the West."

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

"Why the West?"

"Why not?" countered Rufus sullenly. "After my father—anyway that's where I headed."

"Father dead?"

"No."

"Kick you out?"

"Y-yes."

"What's his name?"

"Vincent M. Rundell," Rufus stated a little proudly.

"Never heard of him," declared the Wolf. "What did he kick you out for?"

"None of your damned business," Rufus gritted.

The Wolf merely raised his eyebrows. His eyes continued to burn into young Rundell's with a fierce glow. "So," he rasped. "Got a little spunk after all, eh? Why the hell didn't you show it to Burleigh? You let him run you off like a yellow dog. I walked up in time to see it. I followed you and circled in time to meet you here."

"What for?"

"To see if you were really a coward." The Wolf's perpetual leer seemed to deepen. "And you are. You poor rabbit! A fine breed the Rundell must be."

"What's it to you?" Rufus flared up again.

The scorn in the other man's eyes cowed him. Then the Wolf laughed, and his taunting laugh was worse than his insults.

Something thudded on the ground at Rufus' feet. He glanced down to see one of the Wolf's heavy six-shooters. "Pick it up!"

Rufus did, and eyed it intently.

"Why—why, this is a Burlington forty-five," he could not refrain from saying. "My father makes these guns."

"Your father didn't make that gun," rasped the Wolf, "It was made while old John Burlington ran his own factory. If you know so much about guns, can you shoot one?"

"Yes. I've done a lot of trap shooting."

"In that case you'd better take careful aim at me, and pull the trigger. You'd better be quick, because I'm going to brand you with this red-hot iron, you coyote."

THE WOLF clapped his badly-used hat over the tips of the three bars of the tripod and yanked the whole contraption from the ground. Rufus sat rigid, as if turned to stone as the Wolf leaped to his feet, brandishing his terrible weapon.

"You damned pup, I'm not playing with you!" bellowed the Wolf anger. "I'm going to brand you!"

His eyes almost emitted sparks as Rufus made no move. "What? Don't you believe me?"

"I believe you." Rufus' answer was scarcely audible.

"Then why in hell don't you defend yourself?"

"I—I can't," groaned Rufus. "I—I am afraid."

"Afraid to defend your own life? Any cornered thing will try to do that."

"Oh, Gawd!" chattered Rufus. "I can't—even against this—this man."

The gun sagged from his limp fingers. The Wolf peered intently into his face with a malevolent grin of brutal satisfaction. Then he tossed the iron rods to one side, picked up his gun, and reseated himself.

Dully Rufus realized that the Wolf's unaccountable rage had as unaccountably passed. But the stark fact remained that he had failed to meet a crisis more miserably than he had ever failed before. And he was ashamed...

With moody eyes he stared into the heart of the fire. For some queer reason he was beginning to feel drowsy, indifferent. The glowing logs remained bright—became brighter, while everything else faded from the perception of his senses. He couldn't understand why he felt this creeping indifference to his fate.

As from a long distance the harsh voice of the Wolf reached him. "You're worse than a coward—you're spineless. Bah! I can't destroy a thing like you. You enjoy greater misery by living. But the next time we meet and I command you to strike—no matter what or where—you'll strike to kill. Remember!"

Rufus shuddered without looking up from the fire. He continued to stare at the fire with hypnotized eyes. Idly he wondered what made the flames glisten and shine so dazzlingly as to hurt his eyeballs. He stood the agony for a space as though he were held in a trance he could not break. He struggled violently to release himself—to shut his eyes. At length, when he knew he could stand the pain no longer, he found that he could move one arm. He flung this up before his face to shield it from the flames—and awoke to find the glare of the sun in his eyes.

Before him, holding the bridle reins of three horses, stood Lee Grover, who seemed like an old friend. As far as the eye could reach, under the dazzling sun there was nothing but stunted bushes and sandy soil. The mountain had vanished. There was no fire, no starlit sky, no Wolf. Instead, the loveliest girl he had ever seen was bending over him solicitously...

* * *

DAWN HAD been softly brushing the eastern horizon with fingers of delicate pink when the owner of the Burton ranch rode into Juarez with his daughter. Lee Grover accompanied them. Burton had not been able to start for town immediately after supper; important business had called him away for a time. As a result, it had not been far from morning when they left the ranch.

The street in Juarez was deserted. All the houses with the exception of the *Garden of Delight* and the *Bisa House,* were dark. Noise and bad music still came from the dance hall.

They drew rein between the two buildings.

"You say you directed this Rundell to Hatfield, Lee?" asked Burton. "Inquire in the dance hall, will you? Sue and I will wait out here!

Grover dismounted and strode into the place. He returned with "Soup-bowl" Hennessy, the piano player, in tow. Soup-bowl, so called because of his concave physiognomy, respect-

fully approached the stirrup of the ranchman.

"Tell Mr. Burton what yuh jest told me," directed Grover.

"Yes, sir. I didn't see th' kid come in, Mr. Burton, but I learned later that he'd come from the *Pisa House*, lookin' for Salty Sam. He was talkin' to Pete, the bartender, when Buffalo Jones throwed uh whisky glass into Pete's face. Doc Burleigh patched up th' barkeep an' sorta took th' kid under his wing. They played faro until th' boy lost his roll, then Burleigh ordered him to git outa town."

"It was robbery!" the girl exclaimed.

"Mebbe so, miss," admitted Hennesy. "But nobody dast interfere with Dude Dick."

"Where is the boy now?" inquired Burton calmly.

Hennessy pointed suggestively toward the desert.

"Burleigh told him to travel, an' I reckon he did. Didn't even stop for his hosses."

"Oh!" breathed Sue, in swift understanding.

"And what did Hatfield say to this—after the young man had already applied for his protection?" the rancher inquired softly.

"Sam wasn't here," stated Hennessy.

"Get him, Lee," Burton said crisply. "And Hennessy, you go in the hotel and rout out Gelding."

The fat innkeeper came out with his night shirt tucked hurriedly into his trousers. "I wouldn't of got out o' bed for nobody but you, Mr. Burton," he informed. "What's all th' trouble?"

"About your recent guest, Gelding. What did you do to send him over to Hatfield?"

"Why, I didn't do nothin'. He was eatin' his supper when I left th' dinin' room to carry Turner up to bed. Buffalo Jones had laid Turner out. When I come back young Rundell was gone."

"What was the quarrel between Jones and Turner about?" demanded Burton.

"I ain't got no call to talk myself into uh mess o' trouble!" Gelding began.

"It was over Target steers, was it not?" Burton insisted keenly. "An admission of the truth to me will not get you into trouble, man."

"Well—yes," admitted Gelding.

"Jones was remonstrating with Turner for rustling that particular brand of cattle, wasn't he," Burton said coldly, "and Turner was knocked out?"

"That's th' size o' it," agreed Gelding reluctantly. "When Turner gets goin' again Jones had better make hisself scarce. Turner's fast with uh gun an' he likes to use one."

"So I've heard," commented Burton. "When you see him this morning you might tell him that I have my steers back, and doubtless since he has learned the enormity of his offense, he will be afraid to repeat it. Don't forget to tell him."

The rancher turned toward his daughter to speak. She laid one hand on his arm. "Do you think that is wise, dear," she said, "to send such a sneering message to a desperado to keep him away?"

"It will bring him," Burton responded briefly.

Grover came out of the dance hall into the growing light of morning. "It seems like Hatfield is out o' town, Charlie," the old plainsman said. "Left for Dallas on th' Footsore an' Weary. Nobody was to know he was gone for fear somebody might try to shoot up th' place in his absence."

"Footsore an' Weary?" said Sue. "Heavens, what is that?"

"Colloquialism for the Far South and Western," informed her father. "So young Rundell was frightened out of the hotel by Buffalo Jones and ran to Hatfield for protection. Instead, he fell in with Burleigh, who stripped him and sent him into the desert; we are too late."

"I beg pardon," a cool voice drawled from the doorway of the *Garden of Delight*. "You were asking for Mr. Hatfield? Perhaps I can be of some assistance."

The immaculate Dude Dick Burleigh stepped out into the street.

7

AT THE appearance of Burleigh, Gelding and Hennessy hastily departed, without a word. The renegade doctor calmly approached the riders, and spoke to Burton.

"I understand you are inquiring for a young man by the name of Rundell," he said, his cold, expressionless eyes meeting the dark ones of the grave-faced rancher. "My name is Richard Burleigh. I had the pleasure of the young man's company for a time last evening. Perhaps I can give you the information you desire."

Each man recognized a personality as strong as his own, yet vastly different. Grover edged his horse toward the girl's. That this was a challenge on Burleigh's part to take exception to his recent actions he knew. And that Burton would likely accept it the old man also knew—unless it was for the girl's presence.

"Are you the man who drove a defenseless boy out into the desert?" Sue cried, eyes flashing scornfully.

Burleigh's lips parted in a cold smile, and a light kindled in his eyes. He removed his hat and bowed deeply. "Ah, a lady," he murmured. "I didn't know—the poor light. Forgive my discourtesy."

Sue was nonplussed.

"Granted," her father said ironically. "Since you are so obliging, suppose you explain Rundell's departure."

Burleigh smiled. "There was a row in the place. Mr. Rundell was unused to such roughness. So, being the only gentlemen in the place, we played faro together. Unfortunately he lost all his money to the house. Had I won it I could have returned it, but I was loser myself. He made some rather bitter and unjustified accusations, and left rather unceremoniously, heading out into the desert." He smiled at Sue. "Had I known he was a friend of yours I would have gone to any lengths to have saved him inconvenience."

"You have the nerve to say that—after you drove him out to die?" Sue said scornfully.

"Perhaps I was a bit hard on him," Burleigh murmured contritely. "If there is anything I can do to make amends I will gladly do so."

Burton spoke drily. "You might give him back his money."

Burleigh smiled again. All his animosity to the ranchman seemed to have melted away. "Gladly, sir." he agreed. "When you locate the gentleman if you will notify me I will use my influence with the house to see that he is reimbursed."

Grover snorted contemptuously, but Burleigh did not favor him with a glance. He kept his admiring eyes on Sue's face.

The ranchman met his daughter's eyes "Well?" he asked softly.

With a freezing calm Sue glanced at Burleigh. "It is the least you can do," she said to him coldly. "Let's go, Father—out to make amends for the revolting deed of this disgusting person. We must find Rundell before he dies."

She shook her reins, and saw Burleigh bow deeply, a mocking smile on his thin features.

A thoughtful remark of her father's dismissed Burleigh and his effrontery from Sue Burton's mind. "The retribution of fate!" he mused aloud. "Twenty years ago the father drove me to this wild country. Today the son is driven out of this wild country."

"Th' night winds covered his tracks," was Grover's comment. "Reckon we'll have to circle uh bit. Th' sun'll be up in uh minute now..."

* * *

THE TRANSITION for Rufus Rundell was startling. In the twinkling of an eye mountains had changed into desert, the mad Wolf into Lee Grover, night into day, and the stars into the eyes of this lovely vision hovering over him. Automatically he swallowed water from the flash held at his lips.

His throat was parched, his mouth filled with an acrid taste. He was hot and cold by turns. His thoughts were disconnected, vague. Then memory returned. He stared up wildly.

"Where is he?" he cried sharply. "Where is *he?*"

"Where is whom?" A voice as lovely as the girl's face fell on his ears.

"The Wolf!" he exclaimed anxiously.

A slim, cool hand touched his brow. "He has fever, Father," Sue said firmly.

"What's that yuh say 'bout th' wolf, young feller?" queried Grover. "Where'd he go?"

Grover shook his head. "He never was here, son," he answered gently. "Leastways, they ain't no tracks o' 'im."

"But he was here!" Rufus cried. "I was with him—in the crevice in the mountain! The madman with the branding irons and the revolvers!"

"Mebbe so, son," Grover remarked soothingly. "Mebbe so. But yuh're eight mile out on th' desert now. How'd yuh git here?"

"I don't know." Rufus stared at the empty expanse. "I was wandering along in a northerly direction when I happened upon him in a crack in the mountain—just a few minutes ago."

"Yuh been layin' here on th' ground fer some time," said Grover.

Rufus shuddered. "But it was all so real," he murmured. "I can't believe it was a dream."

"I reckon yuh been out o' yore mind, wanderin' out here in the dark," opined Grover.

"Father," said the girl," he is ill; you can't be indifferent to this!"

The man addressed as "Father" spoke. His vibrant, stern voice was gently resonant.

"This country has no use for weaklings, Sue." he said. "It would be murder to keep him here."

"It is murder to let him go!" she cried. "He may be getting pneumonia."

With a violent effort Rufus

twisted his head and stared up at the man whose knee was supporting him. He met the impersonal gaze of the finest pair of dark eyes he had ever seen, in a finely drawn face in which great strength of character was indelibly carved. For some subtle reason Rufus was drawn toward him. He felt the man's coldness, but also felt a desire to win his approval.

"What would you have me do?" Burton asked Sue.

"Take him back to the ranch, of course," she said.

"A Rundell on the Burton ranch?" mumured her father.

The meaning behind the words he heard were beyond Rufus, but that there was dissension over him was apparent.

"Please," he whispered, "don't bother about me. I am not worth it." He fell forward unconscious.

"Assistance and hospitality," Sue said firmly, "are two of the first laws of the West. Don't force Lee Grover to remind you that this is so, Father."

Silently Burton motioned for Grover to aid him in placing the unconscious Rundell across one of the horses...

* * *

FOR FORTY-EIGHT hours Rufus Rundell lay in bed, unconscious and delirious by turns. He did not, however, develop pneumonia.

And with his clean-cut features, and the fine curve of his jaw, even Burton found it hard to dislike him. When he was delirious he bared the shameful secret of his soul; Burton sat by the bed hour after hour, staring at him with burning eyes which reflected a comprehensive knowledge of his suffering.

The young man appealed to Sue's sense of the romantic. She was horrified, though, at the glimpses of torment.

It was toward the end of their long vigil, just before Rufus relaxed into a sleep from which he awoke entirely rational, that his delirium approached an apogee of despair. He lived again that football game at college when he lay down almost on a goal line because the opposing tackle chilled him; he painted in burning words the experience when he could not rescue a drowning child because of fear; he recalled incidents of his childhood which should have been understood and corrected by a money-mad and power-blind father. And he relived that vivid hour he had spent in the clutches of that awful creature, the Wolf.

"Dad," Sue whispered, eyes wide and bright with the intensity of her emotion, "is this truth that he speaks? Are other people like that only we don't know it?"

Burton pondered. This was the time to sever the thread of her pity. Instead, he said: "My dear, the being does not live who does not have some fiber in his soul which vibrates to fear. Of course, there are different kinds of fear—and different kinds of courage. The brave man is not the one who experiences no fear. He is the man who proceeds in spite of fear. A man who is devoid of fear is also devoid of imagination."

"But that cannot be." Sue frowned. "You are the bravest man in the world, and nobody can call you a senseless clod."

Burton's eyes kindled. "I have always tried to live up to your ideal," he murmured tenderly, "but I must be truthful. All men are cowards and I am one of the greatest. I was afraid twenty years ago to accept certain terms from this man's father; I was deathly afraid because of what you would have thought of me today."

"That wasn't fear," Sue denied emphatically. "That was courage. You gave up everything for your sense of honor. Oh, you've told me enough for me to know the whole thing as it was."

"I didn't look at it then as courage. It was fear of the future and therefore—fear. Was it right for me to surrender everything to which you had a right because I was afraid of your future opinion?"

She laughed and kissed him. "I am satisfied with everything you have done—and I haven't suffered. I'm the most fortunate girl in the world,

and you're not at all like that poor boy there."

"No," Burton admitted thoughtfully. "There is no doubt that he is an arrant coward. But it is wrong to think of him as a—a creature remote from the rest of us. He lives, he thinks, he suffers. His is just an aggravated case."

"It is breaking his heart," Sue murmured pityingly. "He hates his weakness so. I wonder if—if his father knows about it?"

"I doubt it," replied Burton coldly. "His father is incapable of finer emotions. If he does know it he has no sympathy for it you may rest assured."

"Oh!" said Sue. "But what in the world makes him so delirious? He hasn't had any fever."

"He was drugged."

"Drugged?" she gasped. "By whom? And why?"

"He has raved about drinking two cups of coffee with the Wolf."

"Then there really is such a person as this—this Wolf? And Rufus Rundell really did meet him?"

"Doubtless," admitted Burton shortly. "But I think it best to say nothing of the matter at present. He is quieting down. I believe he will be all right by morning. You run along to bed; I will sit with him."

Sue brought a fresh glass of water to the table by the bed and placed a book at her father's elbow. She glanced at Rufus who had fallen into an uneasy slumber.

"Poor boy!" she murmured, and softly left the room.

8

BURTON was sitting there when dawn stole in through the window and Rufus lay in a deep sleep. He was still there when the sleeping man finally opened his eyes and stared blankly about the well - furnished room. Recognition slowly dawned in Rufus' blank stare as he saw Burton.

"Oh." He smiled slightly. "So you did rescue me from the desert a while ago."

"Two days ago," corrected Burton. "How do you feel?"

"Two days ago? Have I—been sick? Out of my head?"

"Nothing serious. How are you feeling now?"

Rufus sat up in bed, put out one hand to steady himself.

"Just a trifle weak," he replied. "I'm awfully sorry to have troubled you. To whom do I owe my debt of gratitude?"

"My name," said the ranchman slowly, "is Charles Burton. You are at the Burton ranch. No thanks are necessary. If you owe any you owe them to Lee Grover who brought me word of your probable plight."

Rufus smiled reminiscently.

"Do you feel well enough to get up?" asked Burton. "It is no trouble to serve your breakfast up here."

"No, I want to get up."

"Very well. Your clothes are hanging in the closet. We could not find your hat. You will find towels, razor, soap in the lavatory through that door. You will find us downstairs."

"Yes, sir. I left my hat at the *Pisa House*. And say, Mr. Burton!"

The ranchman turned with one hand on the door.

"Who—er—I mean, I wasn't dreaming, was I, when I thought a beautiful girl was bending over me out there on the desert?"

"That," said Burton, his tone cool, "was my daughter."

After breakfast, while they lingered over their coffee, Rundell murmured: "You people have shown me a kindness and hospitality far beyond my deserts. And now, if you will be so kind as to direct me northward, I will send for my horses and be on my way."

"Where, northward?" Burton asked.

"Why—er—I guess I will go to Kansas City," hesitated Rufus. "Since

I have lost my money I shall have to find work."

"You are in no condition for that" Sue broke in. "Why don't you notify your father?"

Rufus turned red and stared down at his hands. Then he looked up defiantly. "I suppose I owe you some sort of an explanation," he said bitterly. "My father and I have severed relations. We—well, he kicked me out, disowned me because—because I'm afraid of my shadow."

Burton's glance sharpened. Why had Rundell made such a blunt admission? Reluctantly Burton reached the conclusion that Rufus was sincere. But unnecessary honesty was not a companion trait to cowardice; it puzzled the ranchman.

"What you wish to do is your own affair," he remarked. "However, there is no hurry. You must remain here for several days longer. For one thing, some of your losses in Juarez might be returned to you."

Rufus looked his intense surprise. "I don't understand," he murmured. "I may have claimed I was robbed in the heat of anger, but the game I was in was probably honest, and—and I can't stay here."

With no intention of letting Rufus depart Burton resolved to call his bluff. "Very well," he agreed politely. "If you don't feel that you can remain I shall ride back with you to Juarez this morning and see that you depart safely."

Rufus braced his shoulders. "I am ready, sir," he said, rising to his feet.

"Father!" Both men looked at Sue. "You know he is not strong enough to ride to Juarez and then ride right on from there. I won't permit you to leave, Mr. Rundell!"

Burton shrugged faintly and smiled.

"We are overruled, Mr. Rundell," said he. To his daughter he said: "Take him out and show him over the ranch so far as his strength will permit. And send Williams to me in the office."

WHEN WILLIAMS entered the office, Burton was at his desk.

"Sit down, Williams. Forget cattle and ranch work. What I wish to talk about this morning is outside your regular business."

"Yes, sir," agreed Williams noncomittally. Seating himself he rolled a cigarette.

Burton turned in his chair and gazed out through the wide window in his office which gave him a view of the corrals, bunkhouse, and a stretch of fenced land to the eastward over the valley.

"Has Grover come back yet?"

"No, sir."

"He'll be here tomorrow or the next day. When he comes I want one of the boys to ride over to Juarez with him and bring back a saddle horse and a pack mare which I have a good idea a man named Burleigh will be found to be holding there."

Williams' eyes widened a bit, and his nostrils flared. "Yuh mean—take 'em away from him if he's got 'em?"

"Oh, I think he will surrender them—if the proper persuasion is used. No need for a pitched battle, I imagine."

The foreman's face fell a trifle. "Uh-huh," he agreed morosely. "All right."

"In case he should be stubborn," went on Burton, "they are to be taken away from him."

Williams' face brightened. "I reckon yuh better send me for th' gun persuasion."

"Perhaps so," admitted Burton thoughtfully. "However, there is no great hurry about the matter. The horses belong to the young man who went out with Sue a while ago. I spoke to you about him the day we brought him here."

"Yes, sir. I seen him this mornin'. Him an' Miss Sue took th' hosses yuh ordered for 'em an' went for uh ride. Nice-lookin' young feller, ain't he?"

"Oh, they did, eh? Well, it is about that young man that I wish to talk to you. For reasons that don't concern you, Williams, I want to

keep him here until I decide what to do with him. He is a guest and everyone must treat him as a guest. Nevertheless, I want the boys to chaff him in a good-natured manner. I want to see how he bears up under rough horseplay. No brutal stuff; I want to know how he takes a joke.

"Then I want him worked out with a horse or two. He can ride, but he can't break horses. I'm going to see how he acts. I want him turned loose with some of the stock with nobody to watch him—so far as he knows. I wish to see how he treats dumb animals. And one other thing! Sue must have no inkling of what we're doing. That would spoil my plans."

Williams nodded. "Yuh want to see what kind o' stuff he's smade of. We'll shore give him a good workout."

"We will," Burton agreed grimly. "Williams, I trust you, but as I said, my reasons for this do not concern you. I'll tell you this much. This man is an admitted coward. That is all you need to know."

As Williams left, Burton was angry with himself for taking so much trouble to study Rundell's character. What difference did it make whether the boy was honest? He was a coward and the son of a hated enemy. Had the young man been arrogant or supercilious, Burton could have taken pleasure in humbling him. Instead, the fellow appealed to him and made him sorry for the boy's cowardice.

* * *

RUFUS CAME through with the chaffing of the men by making friends with every one of them by his good nature and quick wit. He was ready to do his share of work and more, quick and eager to learn about ranch life. He made a sorry failure of mastering the half-broken horse given him to ride, and was ashamed of his failure. Burton found him mastering the animal with kindness and lumps of sugar.

The young man made firm friends with the dogs and domestic stock. He was a gentleman, honest, courteous, capable of many things, and kind to animals. None of these traits were compatible with the meanness of cowardice and it baffled Burton.

He staged a special little drama which was calculated to bring a flaw of crookedness to the surface, and found instead that Rufus was thoroughly trustworthy. As a last resort he sent the unsuspecting Rufus out with a puncher whose command was to abuse a favorite saddle horse of Sue's. With a companion of apparent like tendencies Burton calculated that Rundell's inherent cruelty would show itself.

Instead of the expected result, Rufus forgot himself so far as to remonstrate against the brutality of the puncher. Following instructions, the cowboy tried to force a quarrel with the young man. He slapped Rundell across the face and stood genuinely surprised when Rufus merely stood still and took the blow without attempting retaliation. Burton came upon the scene to find Rufus immovable with fright, tears of angry despair in his eyes.

"What seems to be the disturbance here?" demanded Burton authoritatively.

It was Rufus who spoke.

"N-nothing, sir," he stammered. "The—horse bit me and Bert here stopped him in time to save my shoulder."

He lied, not to cover his shame, but to protect the man who, he thought, wanted to fight him.

* * *

AT THE end of a week Burton was no nearer a solution of his problem than he had been the first day. It was at this moment that Dick Burleigh put in an appearance.

Burton was in his office when he saw Burleigh riding up. Seeing the ranchman through the window, Burleigh dismounted and made his way toward him.

"May I come in?"

Burton arose and opened the door. Burleigh entered, his thin features touched with a cold smile. He

glanced curiously about the book-lined study, then expectantly at one of the chairs by the desk.

Not receiving an invitation to sit down, Burleigh seated himself and appropriated a cigar. "I took the liberty of calling, Mr. Burton, principally to inform you that there may not be a possibility of reimbursing your—friend—for his faro losses, but also to keep my promise to make what amends I can. His horses were taken over to pay on overdue hotel bill, but I have arranged to be personally responsible for having them returned to your guest as a favor to your daughter, who was so disturbed."

"I am sorry you troubled yourself," Burton said coldly. "I am sending for the horses tomorrow."

"Ah, in that case I have saved you a trip for nothing."

"By that you mean?"

"Your pardon, but it is to your daughter I am presenting the horses, not to you."

"Very well," said Burton indifferently. "In behalf of my daughter I thank you; I now bid you a good afternoon."

"Not so fast, not so fast," murmured Burleigh in the softest of voices. "It was to Miss Burton that I made the promise. It is to her in person that I will keep it. If you will please call her?"

The ranchman's face became inscrutable. "Your insolence surpasses all bounds," he commented in a metallic voice. "You will do yourself the great favor of leaving this ranch immediately—never to return—or I won't answer for the length of your life."

Burleigh's smile altered, became a trifle more steel-like. "You do not mean that you would lay hands on an unarmed man?"

Burton again glanced over his figure. It was true; Burleigh had been wise enough to come without weapons.

"Very well," he said in a studied voice. "You are in no danger of your life here, but if you do not depart at once I will have you lashed to your horse and driven off the ranch."

Burleigh's smile left his face. He rose to his feet with an outraged grace that was perfect. However, for a brief instant deadly hatred gleamed out of his gray eyes.

"I have no alternative," he said. "I am alone and defenseless, besides having come upon an errand of courtesy." He glanced about the room which contained arms as well as books, and he longingly eyed the well-filled gun rack only a few steps from him.

"If you prefer to be carted off the place," suggested the cold voice of the ranch owner, "you are at liberty to select any type of weapon you see there. They are all loaded and ready for use. I will wait until you are armed exactly as I am." He indicated the heavy revolver at his hip. "This is a Burlington forty-four. Its mate is in the case. Or, if you prefer, there is a pair of thirty-eight target revolvers with seven and one-half-inch barrels and finely adjusted partridge sights. We can use those."

Burleigh smiled mockingly. "So, this is the way you treat gentlemen?"

He bowed elaborately and moved toward the door. As he glanced out the window he saw that Sue Burton and Rufus Rundell had ridden up to the house, and that the young man was helping her to alight.

Burton saw the quick flame which kindled in the renegade surgeon's eyes as Rufus set the girl lightly on her feet.

"So?" repeated Burleigh. "Do you mind telling me what you intend doing with that gentleman of sublime courage?"

At that instant the decision Burton had been seeking was born. "Do with him?" he repeated in a voice so bitter and yet so cold that it seemed as though passion had been frozen there. "I shall send him to the gallows as a killer! Now *you* get out of this valley! Pronto!"

To himself, as he followed the man outside, Burton added: "And you shall be his victim!"

9

RICK BURLEIGH rode back to Juarez in a thoughtful mood. His ejection from the Burton ranch did not bother him, for he had snatched victory from defeat. Under the very nose of Burton he had untied his mount, walked over to Sue, and passed a pleasantry as well as a compliment to her before her father's crisp voice had broken in like a keen knife: "I'll give you just sixty seconds to get out of gun range!"

Burleigh had smiled, mounted, and wheeled his horse. Lifting his hat he had spoken. "Good afternoon, my friends, but not good-by. As our neighbors, the Mexicans, have it, *adios—hasta manana.*"

He had departed, after sowing the seeds of an active enmity behind him, but retaining his calm self-possession. His visit to the Burton ranch had convinced him of two things—he must possess Sue Burton, and the Burton holdings were also worth possessing. There was only one sure way of attaining both. He must marry the girl.

That Burton had read his intentions, at least as regarded the girl, was obvious. He might tangle Burton up in some mess by which he could force the daughter to marry him for her father's sake. But no, that smacked too much of the melodrama of the past generation—the mustached villain who lifted the mortgage on the old homestead in return for the dutiful daughter's hand. And then, too, he paid Burton the compliment of doubting whether he could involve the rancher in any predicament from which he could not extricate himself.

What had been the meaning, if any, behind Burton's statement that he intended making a killer out of young Rundell? He knew, surely, that the boy was a coward. Of Burton's hatred for the family of Rundell, Burleigh was completely unaware. With him the question was, did Rundell's cowardice suffice for Burton's peculiar statement? If the rancher meant it, it was not improbable that he had selected Burleigh for the intended victim, killing two birds with one stone?

This was a far-reaching superstructure to erect upon a foundation of sheerest fact. Nevertheless, Burleigh was entirely in accord with Burton's voiced intention. He had not been so entranced at sight of the girl that he had overlooked the interest the two riders had had in each other.

Yes, Burleigh was quite in favor of Burton's plan. But his own touch was needed on some of the finer details. Instead of becoming the possible victim of the plot, permitting Burton the privilege of selecting a suitable victim, Burleigh thought he could make a far better choice. He would select the victim for Rundell's hand; that victim should be Burton.

"The question is," he mused, as he rode into Juarez, "can I bring the kid up to the proper point of tension, then push him over? I think I can. But I must learn more about both of them."

LEAVING his horse at the livery stable, Burleigh proceeded straightway to the *Garden of Delight*. He found the piano player already at his accustomed post and touched him lightly on the shoulder with the tip of one finger. "Over to the corner table, Soup-bowl," he murmured. "I want to talk to you."

Hennessy glanced up into that inscrutable face in affright, gulped and nodded.

"Sit down, Soup-bowl," Burleigh directed, as he dropped into a chair himself. "Compose yourself. I want you to tell me exactly what was said and done by everybody within your hearing that morning Burton came here with Grover in search of that fellow Rundell. And Soup-bowl! Think accurately. Don't leave out

anything, and don't put in anything."

The piano player paled. He licked his lips nervously. "Yuh're askin' one helluva lot, Doc," he complained. "How am I goin' to remember every little thing that happened uh week ago? Uh sorta wilder night'n usual."

"Do your best," sighed Burleigh. "I am not too critical. Only remember that I shall check up on your story."

Resigning himself to the inevitable, Hennessy cleared his throat and launched into his recital. Burleigh learned many things he had not known before, and several things that Hennessy did not know he was telling. When Soup-bowl finally fell silent, Burleigh drew a long, slow breath.

"There is something in the past fuming up here," he muttered. "I wonder what I could dig out of Corn Grover. What do you know about this hell-fired Burton, Soup-bowl? Where did he come from?"

"I dunno. He's been in these parts for years. Mebbe Salty Sam or Amos Geldin' could tell yuh somethin'. They been here longer'n anybody else. Yuh've heard how he gits rid o' people that bother him? That's all I know 'bout him."

"No one hereabouts bears any special love for him then, I take it," remarked Burleigh.

"Well, I don't 'spose nobody'd cry themselves to death if he was to be took off sudden-like," Hennessy admitted. "Anything else yuh want to ast me?"

"No. Tell the bartender to give you a quart of liquor and charge it to me... Oh, yes—one thing more. Have you seen Turner today?"

"He was in here this afternoon. Said th' dentist was workin' overtime to finish uh bridge for him tonight so's he could eat. Said he ain't et nothin' but soup for uh week."

"A very sloppy state of affairs. And say, have you seen Buffalo Jones lately?"

"Nope, I haven't. One o' th' boys said he come to town this afternoon. I ain't seen him myself."

"You haven't heard of any possible meeting between the two?"

Hennessy shook his head.

"That's all." Burleigh dismissed him.

"Thanks for th' booze," said Hennessy, shrewd enough to see that this detail didn't slip Doc's memory while he was in a more or less amiable state of mind."

"Don't get drunk and talk about me," admonished Burleigh.

"Oh, I won't, I won't."

Burleigh watched him make his way to the bar, a thin smile about his lips. Then, nodding to the bartender who looked up at him, he strolled out of the building. He sauntered his casual way toward the little building which housed the only dentist in Oklahoma who could perform good dental work while weaving on his feet from the effects of too much whisky or diluted alcohol.

HE FOUND Turner seated in the uncomfortable chair, alternately spitting and swearing while the dentist adjusted and removed and replaced a bridge to and from his eye teeth. Both men eyed him in some surprise.

"Good evening, Doctor," he greeted the dental surgeon. "That is a nice piece of work... I dropped in to see you, Turner. How long before you will be through?"

"Perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes now," stated the dental expert in a fuzzy voice. "About through with the job." He complained bitterly, "I haven't had a drink for an hour."

Turner growled in his throat. "Yuh been drinkin' every five minutes by th' clock," he contradicted. "If I could live on soup th' rest o' my life I'd of killed yuh two hours ago."

Massey, the dentist, responded to this by pouring himself a drink and tossing it off. Burleigh laughed at Turner's impotent rage. "I must go and change my clothes," he said. "Come over to my rooms as soon as you leave here, Turner. I've business to discuss with you."

Turner nodded and mumbled a reply which was lost as he opened his mouth wide for a reinsertion of the piece of dental work.

* * *

When Turner arrived, Burleigh was dressed for the night. Purposely he had left a peculiar-looking sheath with its encased weapon on the table.

"Sit down, Turner," he invited. "There's a chair near the table. How do the new teeth feel?"

Turner exposed a shining row of porcelain and gold. "Good," he replied grimly. "I bit a hole in that damn Massey's thumb with 'em before I got out o' th' chair."

"He ought to have severed the muscles in your dirty jaw," remarked Burleigh quietly.

"Huh?" grunted Turner, scowling darkly. "I guess you'd of tried that?"

"I would have done it." Burleigh smiled.

"How?" sneered Turner.

"Like this," snapped Burleigh. And before Turner could start to his feet Burleigh had unsheathed the weapon on the table and presented the glittering point of a stiletto at the angle of his jaw.

"I would have severed your masseter muscle which is quivering under the blade, and finished the job by severing what is known as the triangular menti. You would never have chewed again."

Turner's eyes darted about wildly.

"You are not a coward, I see," commented Burleigh. "However, don't make the mistake of going for your gun. I know more about the use of a knife than any Bowie expert or Italian artist you may have heard of."

"I believe yuh," Turner said huskily. "But whatinell do yuh want me for? To dissect? I ain't no stiff."

Burleigh smiled, returning the thin knife to its scabbard. "Just why the allusion to vivisection of dissection?"

"Because," said Turner craftily, "I've been in Philadelphia—*Doctor Richards!*"

BURLEIGH'S face came as near exhibiting emotion as it ever had since he had come to this country. Such a vindictive gleam appeared in his eyes that Turner was frightened.

"And what," sighed Burleigh, "is your knowledge worth out here in Juarez?"

"Nothin'." Turner cringed. "Anyhow, I don't believe all I read in th' papers."

Burleigh regained his customary calm. "That is all aside from the business I have with you, Turner. What I want to know is if Amos Gelding delivered Burton's message to you. If so, how does it happen that a week has passed and you have allowed the owner of the Target brand to go unchallenged?"

Turner sprang to his feet with a roar.

"Why, damn it, I had to have somethin' to eat first, didn't I?" he bellowed. "I can't fight a man on soup, can I?"

Burleigh's eyes twinkled. "No," he soothed. "One could hardly expect that. But even with your new teeth and a hearty meal you were not figuring on blundering blindly into Burton's valley, were you?"

"No," Turner snorted. "I was figgerin' on takin' that fat ox o' uh Buffalo Jones with me. He has somethin' comin' to him."

"So I understand. Even so, what chance would two of you have against Burton and a gang of armed punchers?"

"I was thinkin' 'bout gittin' Burton off to hisself an' shootin' it out with him," admitted Turner. "I hadn't figgered all th' details yet."

"How nice it would be if we could get someone else to do the shooting," murmured Burleigh.

"Jones?" Turner raised his eyebrows inquiringly.

"Hardly. Someone more easily intimidated."

"Yuh're way over my head," declared Turner. "What's in this for you, anyway?"

"That," rejoined Burleigh coldly, "shouldn't interest you as long as

you get a bunch of cattle, and get Burton—safely."

"I reckon not," Turner agreed. "What yuh got up yore sleeve?"

"Suppose we walk over to the *Pisa House* and find Buffalo Jones, then I won't have to explain but once. By the way, you hold him no particular ill will, do you?"

"None that I can't take out o' his hide," grunted Turner. "An' that can wait."

They found the lobby of the *Pisa House* deserted save for a shifty-eyed youth on duty as a night clerk.

"Where's everybody?" demanded Turner.

The young man fixed him with a bored glance. "Geldin's upstairs right now," he informed. "I guess everybody else in this stale burg's over at th' *Garden of Delight*."

"Have you seen Buffalo Jones around here this evening, my young friend?" inquired Burleigh.

"Th' Santy Claus with th' whiskers? Yeah, he was in th' hash house uh few minutes ago."

The two entered the cafe through the side entrance. The place was empty. There wasn't even a waitress behind the lunch counter.

"Shall we go over to th' Garden?" asked Turner.

"I suppose so," began Burleigh. "It is likely—"

The scrape of a chair along the floor and the sound of a smothered cry from the kitchen caused him to fall silent. He glanced at Turner out of the corner of his eye and nodded toward the swinging doors at the rear.

"I heard it." Turner shrugged distastefully. "I guess th' cook burnt hisself with th' soup."

"Soup?" Burleigh did not even smile. "Soup at this time of the night? Let's investigate."

They advanced silently to the kitchen door and stepped quickly through. There before them was a surprising little tableau. The vast and hairy Buffalo Jones was seated on a kitchen chair with his arms wrapped around the slight form of Nellie Gelding, the drab niece of the hotel keeper. The pair were alone in the kitchen.

By sheer weight of arms Jones held the struggling girl on his lap. One massive hand covered her mouth to prevent further outcry; the appearance of spectators startled Jones and he leaped to his feet as lightly as though nothing had impeded his movements. Released, Nellie Gelding righted herself and, darted past the two witnesses for the sanctity of the rooms above. Turner laughed at Jones' discomfiture.

Uuummmhuummm," murmured Burleigh reflectively.

10

LEE GROVER stood before the fireplace in the Burton ranchhouse, holding his hands to the blaze. There was still a cold tang to the morning air. He smiled apologetically at the ranchman, a smile which embraced both Sue and Rufus.

"I been busy th' last few days, Charlie," he said. "Y'see, it's spring an' I been—"

"Planting corn," supplied Burton gravely.

"Yep." Grover grinned. "I git more gallons to th' acre than any farmer in th' country. But I come over because they was somethin' I sorta wanted to mention to yuh."

"What is it?" asked Burton.

"Yuh remember th' message yuh left with Amos Geldin' for Turner?"

Burton nodded imperturbably.

"Well, this mornin' I found traces o' uh camp fire up in th' hills in th' neighborhood from where that bunch o' steers was rustled, I reckon. An' th' fire had been made by white men. I got uh good idee who it is."

"Turner," stated Burton indifferently.

"Him," Grover agreed. "An' yuh either run 'im offen th' hills or stay away from that part o' th' range. A rifle shot ain't impossible if yuh was

ridin' close to th' mountain. Have yuh been out in that direction th' last few days?"

Burton nodded slowly. "Once."

"By yoreself?"

"I had my horse," Burton said drily.

"Never do it again till yuh fumigate them hills," warned Grover. "Turner wasn't alone. They was sign of at least two men."

"Buffalo Jones?"

"Mebbe. But when I was over to Juarez yestiddy I didn't see anythin' o' Turner, Jones—or Dude Dick Burleigh. Salty Sam tol' me all three had been away for two days. More'n one man is campin' too close to th' Burton ranch."

"I have been expecting Turner," Burton said. "I am not surprised at Buffalo Jones—but Burleigh does astonish me. Let me think."

He arose and paced across the width of the room.

Not only had he been expecting Turner, but he had known the man to be lurking near, and had purposely ridden out alone to give the fellow the opportunity of meeting him, since Turner considered himself fast with a gun. But now mention of Dick Burleigh explained why there had been no move on the part of Turner.

Burton recalled now that Burleigh had been pleased with Burton's expressed intention—words he had instantly regretted—of removing a possible rival for Sue's hand. If he, Burton, carried out this idea it would leave but one human obstacle between Burleigh and Sue—Sue's father.

Instantly Burton saw the answer. Burleigh was planning a double play with Turner as a sort of cat's paw and Rufus Rundell the killer. That was why he, Burton, had not been molested while riding alone. It was necessary for Rufus to accompany him before the rustlers would strike.

There was another reason which tended to lead Burton to this deduction. There was a little vale, or depression, on his ranch, fringed with underbrush and close to the mountain. This secluded spot was open, yet veiled from the eyes of anyone in the valley because of the surrounding thicket. The day he had ridden out alone Burton had passed through this clearing. He had seen marks in the soil which told him that a steer had lain there a short time before, trussed up with a lariat and in position for branding. Hastily scattered faggots offered evidence that a laid but unlighted fire had been kicked out of existence.

It was not the season for branding. None of his branding was ever done out on the range in this manner. No branding had been done here. There had been no signs of man or steer. This had been a trap of some sort and he had ridden into it. Why hadn't it been sprung? Because all requirements had not been met.

If I wait forty-eight hours longer, he reflected, *I have no doubt that some scheme will be worked to decoy Rundell and me to that spot. If I refuse to go, they'll hatch another plan, and I won't be so fortunate as to know any of the details. I have an advantage now that is priceless, and a wise man does not relinquish his advantage.*

HE STRODE quickly back to the group at the fireplace. "You are quite right, Lee," he said decisively. "I am going to clear out this mare's nest right away."

Grover stood up. "Let's go."

"Their stage has been set," Burton informed him. "We have already run across a dead branding fire I'm sure is a trap. Now listen closely. About two miles down the valley quite a bit of underbrush creeps down off the mountain and spreads over the valley for a considerable extent. Almost in the heart of these bushes, at the foot of the mountain, is a natural clearing. A small stream of water comes out of a little ravine."

"I know th' spot," stated Grover promptly.

"Good. Now you make your way to the ravine as quickly as possible without letting anyone see you, and ensconce yourself on the top of one of the rocks overlooking the

clearing. There are bushes up there and you will not be seen if you are careful. I will give you thirty minutes start before I ride down there. Cover the clearing with a rifle. And whatever you see going on don't interfere until I get there. I don't think you will have to fire a single shot. I just want you there in case of emergency. And be careful!"

Grover turned to go.

"Sue," said Burton, "order my horse and the one Mr. Rundell has been riding. I want you to accompany me, Mr. Rundell."

"S-sir?" stammered Rufus.

Rufus almost groaned [illegible]ud. [illegible] obligation to ride boldly to meet Buffalo Jones, Turner and Dude Dick Burleigh! Capable as he felt Burton to be, how could one man triumph over three desperadoes in ambush?

Burton had gone to change into riding clothes. "Are you ready, Mr. Rundell?" he called as he came downstairs. Beneath his open coat was the leather harness of a shoulder holster, and his heavy six-shooter was at his hip.

"Oh, my Gawd!" moaned Rufus. "I—I can't go with you, Mr. Burton."

"Why not?"

"I—I am afraid. You don't know what it costs me to make this admission, but—but I'm afraid to go."

"Afraid of what?"

"You—you are going out to meet three desperate men. I know they are desperate because I—I have seen every one of them."

"We are merely going for a ride on my own land," corrected the rancher. "Beyond certain suspicions I have there is no certainty that we will encounter a living soul. If we should, upon my word I promise you that no danger shall come to a guest of mine."

"Please, Mr. Burton!" the young man almost sobbed. "I know I am forfeiting your respect, a respect I desired to win above all things, but I can't help it; despise me, as you should, but don't make me go."

"Get up!" Burton commanded sharply. "Pull yourself together! You talk like a child, sir. I have requested you to accompany me on a trip of inspection over the east range."

Rufus shivered. At the expression of contempt which Burton allowed him to read in his face, he crossed to the stairway. "I'll be ready in just a minute, sir."

"Father," cried Sue, after Rufus had ascended, "how can you be so cruel? If you are doing this to stiffen his courage, why don't you arm him?"

"I have no expectation of seeing him exhibit courage," he said coldly. "But have no fear; nothing shall happen to him. Though I am a bit surprised to see my daughter apprehensive over the skin of a Rundell."

"You know it's you I am thinking of, not him!"

11

THE sunshine was mellow, the sky a faultless blue. To the soft creak of saddle leather and the warm, clean smell of his mount, the spirit of the West was creeping under Rufus Rundell's skin.

Little was said during their easy canter down the valley. Once Burton halted to gaze upon a drifting group of cattle, as casually as though nothing more startling than a picnic lunch awaited them at the end of their ride. Rufus did not realize that Burton's actions were for the benefit of those who were undoubtedly watching.

At last they approached the wooded area where a cow path wound into the heart of the thicket to the clearing in the center. Burton buttoned his coat, hiding the fact that he wore a six-shooter under his left arm; the holster at his right thigh was exposed.

"Mr. Rundell," he directed in a low voice, "if there is anyone awaiting us they will disarm us. Do whatever

they tell you. And don't be alarmed; they will not shoot."

"You mean to let them disarm you?" gasped Rufus.

"Not exactly. But since this is not scheduled to be a battle of firearms, I expect my shoulder holster to go unsuspected. And there is Lee Grover with a repeating rifle. He is a perfect shot with that weapon."

"But—but—you will let them take your guns?" insisted Rufus unbelievingly.

"In case you should be directed to take my weapon," said Burton, "remove the gun at my hip and make no sign that I am carrying another one. And, above all, do not look around for Grover."

Rufus was swept along with bushes scraping the sides of his mount and scratching at his boots. White to the lips, he clutched desperately at his saddle-horn to keep from swaying.

A break in Burton's voice and a sharp exclamation brought the realization that the ranchman had been speaking to him.

"—little stream here where we can water our horses... Hello! What's this?"

The clearing was deserted. Near the center was a brisk little fire in which several branding irons were heating. Near the opposite side of the clearing, lay a trussed Target steer, awaiting the touch of an alien iron. Beside the heavily breathing animal lay a glowing iron where it had been hurriedly dropped.

It was a perfect picture representing a rustler's surprise and hasty departure—planned by an artist. Burton pretended to accept the story unfolded before his eyes.

"Quick, Rundell!" he rapped out. "Go back and get some of the men! I'll circle the clearing. There's a rustler within a few yards of us right now. Hurry, before he gets away!"

Bewildered, Rufus attempted to turn his mount.

"Reach fer th' sky, gents!" a bull-like voice sounded just behind him, to the acompanying *click* of a gun hammer.

Rufus moaned. Never would he forget the harsh bellow of Buffalo Jones. Burton had ridden into a cleverer trap than he had expected. But he did not seem greatly alarmed; he turned his head inquisitively.

"Fall offen yore broncs!" was the second command. "You, young feller! Wake up!"

Rufus saw Burton, arms above his head, swing out of his saddle without their use. A man with a drawn gun stepped from the bushes and leaped across the trussed yearling. They were caught between two fires.

"So!" commented Burton. "Turner! Evidently you don't believe in warnings."

TURNER grinned. "Yuh purty near surprised me, didn't yuh? But since yuh seem to enjoy warnin's lemme tell yuh that yuh've warned yore last man."

"At least the last man as far as you are concerned," retorted Burton coolly. "I never warn a man but once; you have already had yours."

Turner's face darkened. "Don't be so damn cocky, yuh fool! You ain't slated to leave this spot alive."

"Then why don't you shoot me now? None of my men are close enough to hear."

"There ain't no hurry," sneered Turner. "Still, why don't yuh go fer yore gun if yuh want to commit suicide?"

Burton laughed contemptuously. "And I judged you to be brave enough to give an even break."

"Shut up!" growled Turner. "I'll do th' talkin'. Young feller, unbuckle his gun-belt an' take it off. An' don't try no funny business 'cause my pard is close behind yuh."

Trembling, Rufus obeyed.

"Have you got uh gun?" Turner demanded of him.

"N-no," Rufus stammered.

"Yuh know how to fire one?"

"Y-yes."

"Well, buckle that un on—an' quick! We ain't got all day."

Rufus tried, but all of his fingers were thumbs. Buffalo Jones grabbed the gun-belt and buckled it about the young man's waist.

"Draw th' gun," commanded Turner, keeping his own weapon leveled at the silent ranchman.

Rufus managed to do so.

"Aim at Burton," went on Turner grimly.

Rufus merely stared at him dumbly.

"I said, aim at Burton!" snapped Turner. "Do yuh want to get out o' this alive?"

"Why, I c-can't do a thing like that. You must be crazy!"

"Not near as crazy as you're goin' to be if yuh don't mind."

Rundell stared at Burton with agonized eyes.

"Yore last chance to get out with uh whole skin, Rundell," rasped Turner. "Shoot, yuh damn fool! Shoot!"

Rufus closed his eyes, knowing that the next instant would bring the roar of a six-gun and the numbing shock of a bullet over his heart. But Turner couldn't be so merciful.

"All right," he said grimly. "I warned yuh once, an' Burton says that's enough for any man. Off with his coat an' shirt, Jones."

With one mighty yank Buffalo Jones ripped the garments down the back, and laid bare the skin.

"Th' little iron first," directed Turner. "That oughta be enough to stimulate 'im."

Rufus saw Jones bend over the fire with a mighty grunt. He saw Burton calmly lower his arms and unbutton his coat, folding his arms across his broad chest in an attitude of supreme indifference.

"Raise them dewclaws!" rasped Turner.

"This is a more dignified way to die," replied Burton, slowly pivoting until his left side was toward Turner.

SO FASCINATED was Rufus by the branding iron which Buffalo Jones selected, that hé did not note that when Buffalo stepped behind him to administer the burn all three of them would be in a line with the rock upon which Grover was perched. But Turner still commanded the situation with a gun.

"Get ready, Jones," grated Turner heavily. "We'll now cut out th' foolin'. Rundell, you shoot Burton or have yore back burned. If th' first iron won't persuade yuh, we got three more. An' don't make th' mistake o' pointin' yore gun at me or Buffalo'll crown yuh with uh red-hot iron."

"Oh, Gawd, Mr. Burton!" Rufus cried in despair. "What could a brave man do here?"

"You might faint," suggested Burton in pleasant irony. "They can't command an unconscious man."

"You shut up!" bellowed Turner angrily. "I said we'd cut out th' foolishness."

"That suits me," stated Burton succinctly. "Rundell won't shoot, no matter how many irons you have. You'll have to do it yourself in the end."

"Then, by Gawd, I will!" Turner cut in savagely. "After I burn th' miserable little rat to death."

"Where is Burleigh?" Burton went on, as calmly as though he had not been interrupted.

"Burleigh?" Turner started. "What th' hell yuh talkin' 'bout?"

"Burleigh dealt these cards," Burton stated crisply. "Why isn't he sitting in the game. Is he afraid of me —too?"

Turner actually quivered with rage. "Nobody's afraid of yuh, yuh damn liar! Jones, jab that wooden Injun with th' iron!"

In that instant Burton moved. He dropped to the ground in a dive, twisting on his side as he hit the earth, facing Turner. His hand had flipped under his left arm and come out with the blued steel of a .44 in its grip.

Turner fired, but fired too high, and the report of Burton's weapon mingled with his own. Turner's gun clattered to the ground as the man staggered back with a shattered wrist and an oath.

"One warning is all I give a trouble-breeder, Turner," said the rancher's hard voice. "Pleasant dreams."

Burton fired again. Turner toppled backward over the trussed

steer, a round, black hole in the center of his forehead.

Buffalo Jones had dropped his iron and drawn one gun. He brushed Rufus out of his way to throw down on Burton—and found himself looking into the muzzle of the revolver which had just exterminated his companion.

"Freeze, Buffalo Jones, freeze!" admonished Burton. "Drop that gun!"

Buffalo Jones froze. He also promptly dropped his weapon. He made a thorough job of it by delicately unholstering his second six-shooter and dropping it beside the first.

"I am disappointed that Burleigh did not accompany you," went on Burton, as he rose to his feet. "However, don't look for him now if he's in the neighborhood. He couldn't get into this clearing alive."

Buffalo Jones glanced from Burton to the still form of Turner. He slapped one thigh heartily and shook with laughter.

"I told him not to monkey with Target cows," he guffawed...

HIGH UP on a point of the mountain where a bluff afforded a bird's-eye view of the clearing, Dick Burleigh slowly lowered field-glasses from his eyes. Not one detail of what had transpired had he missed. He pursed his lips and sat there musing.

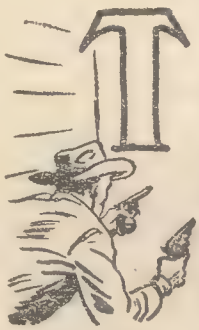
"Well, that little scheme didn't work," he reflected. "And Turner thought he was fast with a gun. In reality he didn't have a chance. I see that you are thorough in your methods, Mr. Burton. Well, Turner knew too damned much, anyhow."

He raised the glasses again and saw young Rundell return to the clearing with the horses of the two rustlers. He saw Turner's body lashed to his own mount before Buffalo Jones swung into his own saddle and took the lead reins of the horse carrying the gruesome burden. Jones headed for the rough trail to Juarez.

As Burleigh lowered his glasses there was movement on top of one of the great rocks at the foot of the mountain. He clapped the high-powered lenses back to his eyes in time to see a tall, raw-boned man with a rifle stand erect and wave to Burton.

"Ah!" breathed Burleigh, recognizing Lee Grover. "So you had my bet coppered all the time, Burton. That long-legged moonshiner must have smelled something and you set a trap within a trap. You outguessed me—this time..."

12



THE COARSE and callous laughter of Buffalo Jones and his surprising change of front hardly registered on Rufus Rundell's senses. He stared in fascination at the gun in Burton's hand.

"My Gawd!" he cried in horror. "You—you murdered him!"

Burton turned his cold eyes onto Rufus. "What do you mean?"

"You shot him down like a dog!" Rufus accused. "You murdered him after you had disarmed him."

Burton's lip curled slightly. "You would accuse me of murder after I saved your life? Did you think Turner's actions were in the nature of a joke?"

"But—but you shot him a second time when he was unarmed and defenseless."

"Would you have called it murder if I had killed him on the first shot?"

"No, of course not. That was an exchange of shots; you were on equal terms and you were defending yourself."

"I could have killed him just as easily. I disarmed him first to give myself time to speak to him and refresh his mind on the fact that I give but one warning, a fact which he seemed to entertain lightly.

"But it was deliberate murder."

"It was deliberate manslaughter,"

Burton corrected coldly. "As I could have killed him with either shot, I fail to see the distinction you are trying to make."

Rufus opened and closed his mouth helplessly. It was logical, it was reasonable. But he felt that it was wrong.

"In my place, do you think," pursued Burton, "Turner would have refrained from taking that second shot?"

"N-no, I don't believe he would have," Rufus admitted.

"Correct. Yet, whether he would have or not is beside the point. I would not have refrained under any circumstances."

He broke his gun and replaced the empty shells from the belt around Rufus' waist. Rufus stood immobile, his downcast eyes on the weapon in Burton's hands. Then he caught his breath sharply and let out an exclamation.

"What's wrong now?" asked the rancher, snapping the gun shut and whirling on Buffalo Jones.

But the hairy Jones was standing in an innocuous attitude, awaiting his captor's pleasure. He jumped as the ranchman whirled on him.

"That gun!" exclaimed Rufus in a horrified voice. "You killed that man with one of the guns my father makes. That's a Burlington forty-four in your hand."

"Quite true, but your father had nothing to do with the making of it. I made this gun myself, two years before your father had the pleasure of ruining me financially."

Forgotten was the recent tragedy, the waiting Buffalo Jones, his own mutilated garments. Rufus, astounded, groped for the meaning of this amazing statement.

"*You* once owned the Burlington Arms Company? But Father took the factory over from the original Burlingtons."

"Exactly," Burton agreed drily. "And I am the man he took it away from; my name is Charles Burlington."

"By Gawd!" broke in the awed Buffalo Jones. "I thought yuh knowed uh helluva lot 'bout shootin' irons."

"Where are your horses, Jones?" demanded Burton.

"Down th' creek jest uh few yards," Buffalo said. "Shall I go fetch 'em?"

"Rundell," said Burton, "go and bring the horses. Quickly. You'll catch cold with your back in that condition."

WHEN RUFUS returned with the two saddle horses, Burton directed: "Lash Turner's body on his horse, Jones, and hit the back trail to Juarez. Take this body back to Dick Burleigh with my compliments. And Jones! This is my one and only warning to *you*. Don't cross my trail again. Understand?"

"I shore do." Jones nodded. "Giddap, crowbait."

Rufus' mind was in a turmoil.

"All right, Lee!" the rancher called out.

Grover arose on the rocks as Burton untrussed the steer and the animal lunged to its feet.

"Fer uh minute I shore thought I'd have to drill Buffalo Jones," said Grover, as he approached. "To save Rufus' back."

"I was worried myself for a moment," Burton admitted matter-of-factly.

All the way back to the house Rufus was silent. He had no time to dwell on his shame, thinking about this hard yet gentle man at his side, this man and his father.

They halted at the corrals and Williams came over to meet them.

"Take care of these horses, Williams," directed Burton. "Then ride over to Stillwater and tell the sheriff I shot a rustler from Juarez named Turner. The sheriff can ride down and take our depositions whenever convenient."

Williams glanced at Rufus' bare back. "Yuh look like yuh'd been to some kind o' a wild party, young feller."

Rufus managed to smile. "The lady was an amazon," he explained. "A bearded lady from Juarez."

"Yuh had uh sort o' side show?"

"No, back show."

As they entered the house Burton said: "Now for some clothes for you."

Rufus laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Before we go any further, Mr. Burton, I wish you would please tell me what you meant by saying that my father took your factory away from you."

Burton stiffened. "That incident is closed, young man."

"But please tell me."

"It isn't a very enviable anecdote about your father."

"Still I want to hear it. Positively, sir."

"Very well. Sit down. You, too, Lee; I know you have wondered about me many times."

Sue Burton came quickly into the room.

"I have been waiting for you to tell me what happened!" she exclaimed.

"Your father is going to tell me something first, Miss Burton," Rufus said, and looked at her father. "If she doesn't know it I'm willing that she should."

Sue's father motioned her to a chair.

"Mr. Rundell wishes to hear of the Burlington Arms Company, my dear. Sit down."

Burton told how Vincent Rundell, years ago, had gained control of the Burlington Arms Company. Failing to persuade the man who now called himself Burton to manufacture inferior guns, he had crushed him financially. Burton laid bare the heartaches and struggles he had experienced in making a new start in a new country, to regain for his daughter what another man had wantonly taken away from her. It was a grim story of strife and pathos, of sacrifice and achievement.

Without having to hear his father's side of the story, Rufus was in complete sympathy with Burton. That his father's harshness had been the soulessness of big business he did not attempt to argue. Burton might have done the same thing in Rundell's shoes. This was not a question of ethics; it was the story of the effect of such on the life of a victim.

WHEN BURTON finished, Rufus rose to his feet and, stiffly erect, faced the ranchman. "Sir," he said, "I make no attempt to pass on my father's actions, but you have my greatest respect. And your great kindness to me, the son of the man who crushed you, proves your magnanimity beyond words. You are the finest man I have ever met. Under the circumstances, though, it would be intolerable to us both for me to stay under your roof an hour longer. If you will lend me a shirt and a coat I will leave."

Whether his words had met with Burton's approval he did not know. But pride demanded that he leave here.

"The coat and shirt, certainly," Burton said slowly. "However, you must remain here to give your deposition to Sheriff Mawson."

"As you wish, sir," Rufus said firmly. "But I can no longer remain as a guest. If you will employ me as an ordinary green cowhand and put me out in the bunkhouse, I'll stay."

"Don't yuh kind o' like him, Charlie?" Grover murmured.

"I do not—dislike him," Burton admitted.

"Well, sir?" Rufus demanded.

"You understand," Burton said coldly, "that in accepting such a position you will not see my daughter, save when she should call on you for service?"

Rufus squared his shoulders proudly. "I understand, sir."

"All right. You're hired. You can move out to the bunkhouse this afternoon. Until then you are still a guest. Suppose you put on one of my shirts until after dinner?"

"Thank you...Mr. Grover, are you going over to Juarez soon?"

"Tonight or tomorrow."

"My warbag that I purchased with my range outfit is still at the *Pisa House*. Will you bring it back with you?"

Upstairs as he changed into some garments of Burton's Rufus muttered to himself:

"I thought I'd never communicate with Dad again unless I could do so as a man. I don't want to now. But I owe it to Mr. Burton—and to Sue—to let him know the enormity of his wrong. Of course he can't make reparation with money—Burton is wealthy again. But he is still under obligation. I'll work for the rest of my life to pay off my share of the debt. I hate to write to him, but I'll do it. And get Grover to mail the letter in Juarez."

Abruptly he sat down and wrote a long letter to his father, concluding:

> I do not weigh the ethics of that affair twenty years ago. You know that morally you were wrong. I repeat, I am not writing to you as a son, but as one who has witnessed a wrong you have done to a fine man and the loveliest girl I ever met. You can't go through life crushing everything and everybody out of your way without some retribution. You and I understand each other perfectly, but we cannot get away from the fact that I am your flesh and blood, and I read the workings of fate in my meeting with these people.
>
> You need never reproach yourself for how you have treated me. Personally, I have only the highest regard for you as a man and a father. But you cannot disregard your obligation to Charles Burlington. What you can do, I do not know. The most you can do will be the least. But you will have to move with care as Burton, as he is now known, is financially well off, and as proud as you are.
>
> Very sincerely, sir,
> Rufus Rundell

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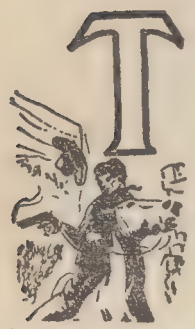

THERE was a faint clang as the iron-shod hoofs of a horse struck against a flintlike stone. The massive rider growled a curse as his mount stumbled. He did not turn to speak to his lone companion on the led horse, for that man was forever beyond the sound of human voice.

The weary horses breasted a rise and paused to breathe before descending to the flat prairie which stretched away to Juarez. The rider uttered an exclamation of surprise as he saw another horseman waiting there.

"Well?" remarked Dick Burleigh.

"Not so well," grunted Buffalo Jones.

"Rustling up business for the undertaker?"

"Burton told me to bring him to you with his compliments. I dunno how, but he's shore got th' rope on yuh. Wasn't yuh watchin' th' clearin' from th' hill?"

"I witnessed the entire performance. Did you know that Grover had you covered with a rifle all the time?"

Buffalo Jones looked sick. "An' yuh let me go on! My Gawd!"

"I didn't know it until too late. Burton was wise to us. He won't be the next time."

"They ain't goin' to be no next time," commented Jones grimly. "I ain't goin' 'round th' Burton ranch no more."

"Never attempt the same trick twice, Jones; we are going to plan along different lines. Tell me what was said."

"Fer one thing I can tell yuh that Burton ain't Burton a-tall. His name is Burlington, an' he used to make Burlington guns till young Rundell's father stole his fac'try from 'im. First he makes shootin' irons, an' then he comes out here to show us how to use 'em. I'm plumb showed; I'm goin' back to tradin' hosses."

"You are going to do just as I say, my friend, or you will be trading horses with all the good Indians. I'll meet you at the *Pisa House* as quickly as you can get rid of your burden."

Burleigh wheeled his horse and touched the animal lightly with his spur.

Buffalo Jones watched the receding figure, then shook his head dismally. "I don't know which is the worst—Burleigh or Burton," he muttered dolefully. "Both killers. That's what education does fer yuh. I like uh plain badman like th' Wolf. I'm

goin' to leave 'em alone—an' they better leave me alone."

But Jones was wrong. The very lack of the education he deplored made it impossible for him to see the accuracy with which the astute Dick Burleigh had fathomed his character, his possibilities, and that he was destined to be a puppet.

He found Burleigh eating a belated dinner in the dining room as calmly and zestfully as though nothing had ever disturbed his tranquil mind. There were several customers at the lunch counter behind which Jones discerned Nellie Gelding. He smirked at her as he approached the lone customer at a table.

"Here you are," greeted Doc. "Sit down and order."

"Here I ain't," contradicted Jones firmly. "I jest come in to tell yuh that yuh can count me out o' this Burton an' Rundell mess. I ain't—"

"Silence, you fool!" ordered Burleigh.

Jones pulled at his beard and stared in mild surprise. An ominous frown slowly gathered on his brow. "Now looky here, Dude Dick," he began heavily. "I'm uh peaceable man an' easy to git along with, but—"

"Sit down, Jones," Burleigh commanded, in a different voice. "I appreciate your sterling worth, and because of that I have something to discuss with you. But I can't do it here. I'll tell you this much. I think I know who young Rundell is. If I'm right I'll work out a safe plan which will mean a lot of money to both of us... Give Nellie your order."

DESPITE the aversion Nellie Gelding felt for both of these men, she hurried to the table because she wanted to hear about any further intention Burleigh had of harming Rufus Rundell, the only polite being and gentleman who had ever come into her drab existence. She felt Burleigh's cold eyes upon her all the while Jones grinned into her face and ordered an astonishing amount of food. She knew that Burleigh now saw beneath her drab shell and found her desirable, and knew that, of the two, Burleigh was by far the more dangerous.

Inwardly shuddering, she waited until Buffalo Jones had completed his order. The most exacting patron could have found no fault with the service. But it was all to no avail; she heard nothing beyond the fact that Burleigh had an inkling as to Rufus Rundell's identity, and was plotting destruction.

"Miss Gelding," Burleigh asked her as she was serving the pie, "Mr. Rundell's things are still here in the hotel, aren't they?"

"Yes," she answered, surprised.

"Where?"

"Up in the room he was to of had that night, I think. You'll have to ask Uncle Amos."

He dismissed her with one of his inscrutable smiles.

"But I tell yuh I don't wanta monkey with this business no more," protested Buffalo Jones.

"You like Nellie Gelding?" purred Burleigh. "But she doesn't like you? And, do you know, Jones, she is prettier than you think she is? In a pretty dress—wine to warm her so that she would sit willingly on your lap—wouldn't that interest you?"

A light kindled in Buffalo Jones' eyes.

"But how could you hold such a girl without money?" went on Burleigh. "Just picture her smiling into your eyes—if she loved you. But she doesn't."

"Don't talk thataway," growled Jones.

"Why not? I'll tell you how to earn the money and make her love you."

"What's your plan?" demanded Jones.

"First we must go through Rundell's effects to see what we can find," Burleigh said, arose, and led the way to the lobby.

Nellie watched them covertly until they disappeared up the stairs, after Burleigh had helped himself to the key to Rundell's room.

Inside it, the two intruders looked around curiously. Rufus' warbag stood under the lone window.

"Rundell didn't even come up here," remarked Burleigh. "So unless someone else has, everything which concerns him is here. But Rundell must not know that anyone has been here."

Five minutes later he had the bag opened. Buffalo Jones leaned over eagerly.

"Don't touch anything," warned Burleigh. "When I get through no one will know this has been opened."

Burleigh found little to identify Rufus Rundell beyond laundry marks. There were no letters, or papers of any kind except a newspaper he tossed impatiently onto the bed.

After a fruitless search, Burleigh commented: "If he is who I think he is, he's traveling mighty light. I wonder if he has anything hidden in the lining of his bag."

Jones picked up the newspaper and glanced idly at the headlines.

"Shucks!" he complained to himself. "Uh Noo Yawk paper, three or four weeks old. They ain't no funny pitchers in it, either."

BURLEIGH glanced up, and his frown swiftly changed into a look of intense interest as his eyes caught a front page headline. "Give me that paper!"

In mild surprise Jones passed it over.

"Well, if yuh're goin' to waste time readin', I'm goin' downstairs," he said.

"Shut up and listen to this!" snapped Burleigh. "*'Rufus Rundell Son and Heir of Vincent Rundell, leaves Pretty Actress in Lurch.'* This is exactly what we want! I thought the name of Rundell was mighty familiar. Listen to this!"

In mocking fashion the paper told how Rufus, held up in a park by a bandit, had fled, leaving his companion alone with the robber. The last cowardly act of Rufus Rundell, that caused his final break with his father, had found its way into this rough country. Rufus had that damning newspaper in his bag and had completely forgotten it.

"What's all this got to do with Burton and us?"

Burleigh fixed him with his cold gray eyes.

"Burton is a wealthy man," he said, "but Vincent Rundell can buy and sell Burton two or three times. Rufus Rundell is Vincent's son, and he was sent out here until the scandal reported in this paper could blow over. Burton was once ruined by Vincent Rundell. What could be more natural than that he would ruin the son? And I happen to know he means to do it.

"Now, instead of making young Rundell kill anybody, we could see to it that Burton killed him. That would send Burton to the gallows because Vincent Rundell would move the earth to avenge his son. We get rid of both Burton and young Rundell in the opposite manner we tried this morning. You would get five thousand dollars—and the Gelding girl."

"I don't see where you fit in a-tall," promptly replied Jones. "Besides which, where'm I goin' to git th' money?"

"From me. And it isn't necessary for you to trouble yourself about me."

"How we goin' to do all this?"

"That I will figure out in detail before we make a move. You had better take a room here at the hotel instead of going back to your place. I want you to stay in Juarez where I can reach you instantly."

Buffalo Jones agreed with alacrity. This arrangement would keep him near Nellie Gelding.

"Then the next thing is to get hold of Rundell," Burleigh went on meditatively. "Then to trick Burton into firing the fatal shot."

"'Sposin' he balks—like th' kid did this mornin'?"

"I don't think he will under the circumstances we shall present. If he does, it will not be impossible to make it appear that he did the shooting."

Buffalo Jones wagged his head knowingly. "I see," he said. "But what if he gits onto us, like he done this mornin'? Yuh said Grover went an' stuck his bill in our business."

"Who is there to warn him?" countered Burleigh coldly. "All if he should hear of it he won't believe it can be done. It doesn't sound possible, does it?"

"Nope," agreed Jones. "An' privately, I think it ain't."

"Confine your opinions and prophecies to the future events in your own life. I'll do the thinking in this matter. I'll show the subtle Mr. Burton something new in subtleties. You might keep your eye on Grover for the next few days. We've a score to settle with him, too."

PLACING the newspaper in his pocket, Burleigh proceeded his companion out of the room and down the stairs. They parted in the lobby where Jones hung around, hoping to see Nellie. It was dusk when he saw the lanky Lee Grover ride into town and establish a precedent by not stopping at the *Garden of Delight.*

Jones promptly walked out of the hotel and followed Grover toward the depot.

Burleigh was in the *Garden of Delight* when Jones came in. "Grover jest come to town an' mailed uh letter down to th' depot," he informed. "I thought I'd better tell yuh."

"Where is he now?" asked Burleigh.

"He was headin' back when I come here."

"Come on," said Burleigh briefly.

At the little railroad station Dick Burleigh accosted the agent and postmaster. "Huggins, did Grover just mail a letter here?"

The postmaster raised his head and stared. "Yep," he rejoined. "Shore did."

"Let me see it."

Huggins laboriously fished the envelope out of the little basket under the mailing slot and squinted at it.

"It ain't writ by him," he vouchsafed. "I seen his handwritin' once when he ordered uh catalogue f'um St. Louis."

"Hand it to me," commanded Burleigh coldly.

"What fer?" demanded Huggins suspiciously.

"Jones, step in there and take it," Burleigh ordered crisply.

"Hey!" objected the postmaster shrilly. "I dasn't let yuh tamper with th' U. S. mail."

"Hand me that letter."

The postmaster squeaked and passed it over. It was to Vincent Rundell of New York, presumably from his son. Ignoring the wild protests of the postmaster, Burleigh tore it open and read it.

"Hand me a sheet of paper and an envelope," he commanded in a hard voice.

"Oh, m'gosh!" groaned Huggins. "Dick Burleigh, yuh ain't doin' uh old man right."

"You've got five seconds before Buffalo Jones wrings your neck," snapped Burleigh.

Without another word Huggins complied with the demand. Burleigh penciled a concise addendum to the letter, copied the address from the torn envelope, and handed the sealed letter back to Huggins.

"Don't make the mistake of holding up that mail," he warned coldly.

"What'd yuh do?" inquired Buffalo Jones as the two men left the station.

Burleigh smiled. "I built a fire under Grover that we are going to fan into a roaring blaze shortly."

Dick Burleigh's plot was taking concrete form. For the amazing postscript he had added to Rufus Rundall's letter read:

> DEAR MISTER RUNDELL, yore son gimme this here letter to mail fer him an' I took the liberty of readin' it first. What yore boy says is so exceptin' that Burton has fooled him. Burton is goin' to send him to the gallows fer murder. I heered him swear to do this with my own ears. If you wanta save yore son you better catch th' next train out this way. Wire me when you will git to Juarez an' I will meet you an' tell you all about it. They ain't no use wirin' the sheriff here 'cause they ain't no sheriff. I figger you can do the most good yoreself mebbe bringin' a couple of good men with you.
>
> Yoren truly,
> LEE GROVER

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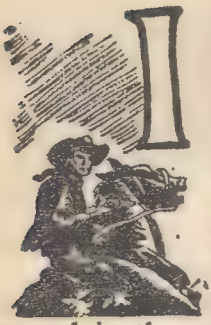

IN THE swift days that followed his acceptance by Burton as a cowhand, Rufus put to good use all he had been learning from the punchers. Already an athlete and a better than average horseman and pistol shot, he daily improved in the use of the lariat and his knowledge of ranch work in general.

Greenhorn though he was, he made a passable cowpuncher. And had it not been for that one faulty streak in him, Williams declared he had all the makings of a top hand. He had already become accustomed to chaps and high-heeled boots.

Of course, the cowardice of Rufus was no secret. But by tacit agreement they never broached the subject to him; while these hardy riders hated cowardice they learned to like Rufus in spite of what they knew. Fortunately nothing occurred to bring that flaw to the surface.

And it was astonishing how many things Sue Burton found for him to do, following her father's instructions, "Save when she should call on you for service." The two still rode together daily, but now Rufus was not her guest, but her attendant.

The sixth morning after he had written that letter to his father they sat on a little knoll in a wooded section north of the ranch buildings. The weather was perfect, the air warm, almost balmy.

They had fallen silent, a bit moody. "Sue," Rufus suddenly burst out, "I can't begin to tell you how kind you've been to me, how much I've enjoyed being with you. Somehow you give me hope. Sue, tell me, is there any purpose in life for a coward like me? I haven't as much business on earth as a yellow dog."

"Hush," she admonished him. "You mustn't talk like that. You mustn't feel like that. You mustn't!"

He shrugged. "It's the truth. You don't think I'm kidding myself that I am even worth my salt as a cowhand, do you? I never was any good—and I've had more opportunities than many other men have in a lifetime."

"Hush," she repeated firmly. "There is always a use for everything. Father says that all men are cowards about something, and he knows. You'll find yourself some day, Rufus, and then you'll laugh at the dark clouds of today."

"I shall never laugh at the agony I have suffered." He shook his head, then looked up at her sharply. "Your father said that?"

"Yes. And he said that he had been studying you ever since you have been here. You seem to be afraid only of people. And you don't have any of the bad traits that go with—with fear at all."

Rufus smiled sadly. "I'm afraid of everything. My father has tried time after time to cure me, but he failed. I—"

He broke off suddenly, at the sound of galloping hoofs.

"Halloo!" called Bert Green, one of the punchers. "I been lookin' for you-all every place. Rufe, there's uh girl from Juarez at th' big house to see yuh. Mr. Burton says to hotfoot it over there right away."

"A girl?" Rufus frowned. "It isn't the bearded lady, is it?"

Bert grinned. "Nope. She's uh shore enough female. I think she's some kin o' Amos Geldin's."

"Let's go see what she wants," suggested Sue.

WHEN THEY rode up to the house, Sue and Rufus entered together. Burton was with the visitor in the living room. The rancher looked up keenly as the two came in.

"Rundell," he said coldly, "this young lady is Miss Nellie Gelding, the hotel keeper's niece, in Juarez. You may remember her."

"I do, sir," Rufus admitted, bowing to the girl.

"My daughter, Miss Gelding," Burton went on.

"How do you do?" Sue said, holding out her hand cordially.

Nellie Gelding accepted it timidly. She seemed nervous with fright.

"Now, Miss Gelding," said Burton, "will you please repeat to Mr. Rundell what you have just told me?"

She nodded, catching her breath nervously. "Mr. Rundell, Dick Burleigh and Buffalo Jones are plotting against your life. I don't know why, or anything about it, but I know they're intending to have you killed by *Mr. Burton!*"

Rufus' jaw dropped. Then, glancing at the ranchman, he laughed.

"Wait!" commanded Burton sharply. "Hear the rest of it."

Rufus sobered.

"Last week," Nellie went on, "they went through your warbag before Lee Grover came for it. They found a—a newspaper which had something in it about you and an actress and your father. And they was talking about trouble between Mr. Burton and your father years ago. They want Mr. Burton to kill you so your father will have him sent to the gallows. I don't see how they can do it, but they've been planning for a week and today Dick Burleigh came to the hotel where Jones was and I heard him say, *'Today is the day to get Rundell.'* I slipped away and rode as hard as I could to warn you."

"How did you know all this?" Burton inquired.

"I sneaked upstairs that first day and heard them from the next room. So I was watching and waiting for them to start something."

"But—but this is preposterous!" exclaimed Rufus.

"Is it?" queried Burton. "If Burleigh, with his keenness, has laid plans along that line it is far from preposterous."

"But you wouldn't kill me!" Rufus protested quickly.

"No. But Burleigh has something up his sleeve."

"It sounds crazy to me," murmured Rufus. He turned suddenly to Nellie. "Why did you take the trouble to warn us?"

"Well—er—" she stammered, "you was so gentleman-like that night you came to the *Pisa House* that—that I liked you. And I hate Dick Burleigh and Buffalo Jones. I hate 'em! And I'm afraid of 'em."

"You poor girl," said Sue. "It must be awful to have to live where there are such men."

"How could they do it?" Rufus turned helplessly toward Burton. "First they try to make me shoot you and now they are going to try to make you shoot me. How?"

Burton shrugged. "I must find out; that is why I called you in."

Verna came softly in from the kitchen and said that there was a boy at the back door who wanted to see Rufus Rundell. Rufus looked surprised, but excused himself and hurried out.

"Oh, I must hurry back," Nellie Gelding whispered. "Before they find out where I've been. I must go back to Uncle Amos."

At the kitchen door a boy of about fifteen or sixteen, on a pinto, was waiting.

"You Rufus Rundell?" he asked, and when Rufus nodded, he pulled a dirty scrap of paper from his pocket and passed it over. "Mr. Huggins—my gran'pop—he's th' telegraph operator—he tol' me to bring yuh this. Writ it out hisself. Says yuh can have the real telegraft when yuh come in fer it."

Rufus took the paper and read, with vast surprise:

RUFUS RUNDELL, BURTON RANCH, VIA JUAREZ. MEET ME AT TRAIN SIX O'CLOCK WEDNESDAY NIGHT AT JUAREZ. (Signed) VINCENT RUNDELL

"Any answer?" asked the boy, as Rufus looked up. "My gran'pop thought it might be plumb important, seein' this is Wednesday."

"No," said Rufus. "Thank you... Verna, would you give this boy a handful of your wonderful cookies for me? Thank *you*."

He rushed back into the living room. "I've got to go over to Juarez right away, Mr. Burton," he cried.

Burton's cold smile sent a faint chill through him. "You have already taken the bait, I see. Bur-

leigh sends for you and you are anxious to go."

"Burleigh?" Rufus' face blanched. "No, sir, it isn't Burleigh. It—it's—" his voice dropped to a whisper—"my father. There's a telegram from him."

"Were you expecting one?" Burton asked in a studied voice.

"No."

"Then how do you come to believe that it is from him?"

"Because I wrote to him, telling him what you have been doing for me and about the obligation he owes you."

Into Burton's eyes leaped a startled, angry expression. "You dared to do that?"

Rufus nodded uncomfortably. "I had Lee Grover mail it for me in Juarez. Now Father has wired he'll be here Wednesday—that's today."

Burton strode rapidly up and down the floor as his thoughts raced furiously. Abruptly he whirled on Rufus.

"Very well," he agreed. "Go to Juarez and meet your father, but don't bring him here with you. If he has really come in response to your criticism, which I greatly doubt, tell him there is nothing he can do for me except to keep as much territory between us as possible."

"But, Mr. Burton, please—" Rufus began.

Burton raised his hand in an impatient gesture.

"No more," he snapped decisively. "If you wish to do so you can of course leave with your father without returning here."

"Oh, I don't want to do that, sir. I—"

"Suit yourself," Burton cut in again, turning his shoulder and speaking to Nellie. "Do you really insist on going back to Juarez?" he asked.

"I must—I must," she insisted vehemently.

"She must stay here with us," Sue put in quickly. "Oh, I know it isn't safe for either one of them to go over to Juarez."

BURTON glanced at his daughter queerly.

"If what she tells us is true they can do nothing to Rufus without my presence," he commented drily. "And *I* have no intention of going to Juarez."

"Rufus," Sue appealed, "don't go! Couldn't you possibly be mistaken about that telegram? Couldn't this be a trap of some sort?"

"I am sure the wire is no fake," said Rufus. "Besides, as your father says, they wouldn't try to do anything to me without his presence."

"But Rufus—Father—I don't like this. This warning and this telegram are too coincidental."

"Rufus, eh?", Burton raised his eyebrows a trifle. "Rufus," he went on in grim irony, "is in no danger of a violent death at my hands. As you are going to Juarez, Rundell, you will see that this girl gets safely back to her uncle. And tell Gelding that if anything happens to her he will answer to Charles Burton as quickly as I hear of it."

"I will return tomorrow, Mr. Burton," Rufus said firmly, "to talk with you. And you must listen to me." He turned to Nellie. "Miss Gelding, will you allow me to see you home safely?"

Sue and her father stood at the east window and watched them ride away.

"Oh!" Sue exclaimed. "Father, he has gone to Juarez unarmed!"

"He wouldn't use a gun if he had it," Burton said coldly; "all he can shoot at is a target."

"Father!" Sue said quickly, at a sudden surprising thought. "That wire from Mr. Rundell! Can't the years have softened him? Can't there be a sort of peace between you?"

"There cannot."

"Why must you be so bitter, dear?"

"In the first place, my child, no telegram came from Vincent Rundell."

Sue's hand flew to her mouth, and she paled. "How do you know?"

"Rufus said Grover mailed the letter for him Thursday night. Mail service between Juarez and New

York is not less than four full days. If Rundell were impulsive enough to rush right out here in answer to the son he has disowned he couldn't possibly get to Juarez in two days. At the very least he would be until tomorrow night at six arriving."

"Then the telegram was a trap, after all?"

"Exactly. It is obvious that Burleigh opened and read the letter Rufus wrote. Perhaps he didn't even send it."

"And you let Rufus go? Why?"

"Because I think the Gelding girl told us precisely what Burleigh intends to do. The day he was here I wired the best detective firm in the country to find out all about that renegade. I got the information yesterday. He is an educated fiend, a former surgeon from Philadelphia who, if arrested, could be sent to the scaffold as a murderer. He has crossed my path once too often. I was considering how best to dispose of him when he sprung this trap. Now, I shall let him hang himself."

"And so you sent Rufus Rundell to his death!" Sue cried. "I'll not let you sacrifice him! You send a rider after him right now and bring him back!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort," Burton said sternly. "Rundell will come to no harm while I'm featured in the plot. And by the time they've given me up it will be too late to harm Rundell."

"If you don't send after Rufus Rundell at once," Sue declared stonily, "I'll go after him myself!"

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SUE'S FATHER whirled and caught her by the wrists. "I have tried to be a wise and good father to you, girl; everything that I have done has been for your sake. I am moving in this matter solely because of you. There is far more than you understand. I must act, and act swiftly. Don't you dare interfere with my plans and arrangements. Do you understand?"

Burton released her and went to the door. "Williams!" he called. "Williams! Come up here at once."

"Williams came running up to the house. "What is it, sir?"

"Williams, send a man on the fastest horse on the place to Stillwater, to tell Sheriff Mawson and his deputy to rush here to the ranch as fast as they can. They must be here before night. I am going up into the hills—may be gone all day. If Mawson gets here before I come back, hold him here. Also, I am expecting a message or a messenger from Juarez this afternoon. He will demand to see me personally. Hold him here, even if you have to shoot him down. Put his message in my desk. Stay right here at the house and see that all these details are carried out. Don't hurt the messenger if he behaves."

"Hell a-poppin', Mr. Burton? Yuh won't leave me out, will yuh?"

"You may count yourself in; be here when I return."

Williams hurried from the house. Burton turned to his daughter with a grim little smile. "Keep a stiff upper lip," he encouraged. "Rely on your dad as you always have."

She watched him swing along the path behind the house which led up into the thickets of Wildcat Mountain. As he passed from sight her thoughts flew back to Rufus Rundell who was riding into trouble, under the fond delusion that he was going to meet his father, and maybe right an old wrong.

Suppose her father's plan, whatever it was, failed this time? What if Rufus were killed? Poor Rufus! He was no man of violence.

The answer smote Sue a sudden blow. "Why," she cried, "I love him! I love him! I can't help it if he is a Rundell and a coward. I love him!"

Then she was running toward the corrals. "If I can only catch him!" she panted.

"'Scuse me, Miss Sue." The apologetic voice of the foreman caused her hands to falter as she was adjusting the cinch of her saddle. "But where yuh goin', ma'am?"

Sue turned and smiled at Williams. "This—this waiting for something to happen makes me nervous," she said. "I'm just going to ride down the valley for something to do."

Williams nodded, satisfied. "But don't go far, Miss Sue."

She smiled again as he assisted her into her saddle. Williams watched her canter away.

SUE HAD to force herself to confine her speed to an ordinary pace for a time. Williams must not suspect that she was riding on a mission opposed to her father's wishes.

Out of sight of the ranch buildings she spurred her mount into a reckless gallop, feverishly searching for the trail Grover used in coming to the valley. At length she espied it and swerved her mount up the steep ascent over the mountain ridges.

She had never been over this route but once—the night they had ridden to Juarez to find Rufus.

Mile after mile passed under the flying hoofs and still she was alone in the vast stillness with no company save that of the sun and the everlasting hills. She topped the last ridge which separated her from the level land about Juarez and still she was alone.

Far ahead, on the top of the gentle slope which led down to the main street of the Border town she thought she discerned two riders. She was too close to turn back now; speaking to her tired mount, she galloped after the disappearing figures.

Recklessly she rode down into the town. Nellie Gelding's saddle horse stood before the rack of the *Pisa House* with drooping head. Down the street Rufus was loping easily toward the railroad station. Sue shouted and urged her horse after him, but he did not hear.

Rufus dismounted at the station platform and passed into the little building. Tossing the reins over her horse's head, Sue darted after him, glancing rapidly about.

Rufus stood at the little railing at the telegraph dispatcher's office. And behind him, slowly approaching, was the bear-like Buffalo Jones; the man's very crouch spelled death to Sue's horrified eyes. She whirled toward the door to call for help—and was confronted by the debonair figure of Dick Burleigh.

"Well," he murmured pleasantly, "this is a delightful surprise. The pleasure is mine, Miss Burton..."

* * *

BACK AT the Burton ranch, hours later, when the sun was sinking behind a bank of clouds, a horseman galloped up to the ranchhouse. Williams was grimly awaiting him at the steps, and recognized Soup-bowl Hennessy, piano player at the *Garden of Delight*.

"Mr. Burton!" cried Hennessy, slipping from saddle. "Where's Mr. Burton?"

"Away," Williams enlightened briefly, letting his hard eyes rest on the speaker.

"Where'd he go?" demanded Hennessy. "I got to see him. I got uh message for 'im."

"I'll take th' message," Williams informed him. "I'm th' foreman here. What's on yore mind?"

Hennessy shook his head worriedly. "This paper is for Burton personal; I don't dare deliver it to nobody else."

"Who's it from?"

"From—I better not say. When'll Burton be back?"

"Soon," said Williams. "Go into th' house an' wait."

Hennessy glanced around uneasily. He hesitated, uncertain as to what procedure he should follow.

"Come on," insisted Williams. "Th' boss'll be back before long."

He squinted along the road leading northward as far as he could see. Hennessy nervously followed his glance. "Where'd he go? Stillwater?"

"Nope. I'm jest lookin' fer th' sheriff. Sorta expectin' him shortly."

"Sheriff?" blurted Hennessy. "What th' hell?"

He spun neatly about and reached for the horn of his saddle.

"Whoa!" said Williams sharply, making a sudden movement with his right hand, and as Hennessy glanced over his shoulder and unwinking eye of a six-shooter halted him. "Into th' house with yuh," commanded Williams. "Git uh move on!"

"Fer Gawd's sake, mister! I—"

Williams motioned impatiently with his gun. Hennessy scurried up the steps and in through the door with a promptitude that was commendable.

"First room to yore left," directed the foreman, following him. "Now, yuh rat," he concluded grimly, closing in on the messenger and seizing him firmly by the neck, "gimme that letter before I let some clean air through yore dirty in sides."

"Ouch! Hey! Let up!" gurgled Hennessy. "They'll kill me if Burton don't git this message. Yuh don't understand!"

"Nobody'll have to kill yuh if yuh don't fork it over. Burton'll git it, don't yuh fret."

"All right," sobbed Hennessy in relief. "Whyn't yuh say so before?"

"An' yuh're goin' to stay here to see that he gits it. Now set down on that bench while I see what yuh brung Gran'ma today. Where's yore gun?"

"I ain't carryin' one," said the piano player placatingly. "Why should I?"

"Yuh shouldn't," agreed Williams curtly, and read aloud: *"Mr. Burton, I have been trapped by Dick Burleigh here at Juarez. I don't know what makes this man hound me like this, but I do know that he is going to kill me if you don't come to Juarez after me at once. He has agreed never to bother me again if yuh will come and shoot out the difference yuh have with him. I told him that yuh were under no obligation to rescue me, but he is standin' over me makin' me write this. He dares yuh to come and meet him on neutral ground and when he is armed. If yuh come he will release me after killin' you, or you can release me after killin' him. He says if yuh are man enough to come, come shootin'. I don't dare add more as he won't let me. God help us all. Rufus Rundell. P. S. Don't do anything to the man who brings this note. He is not to blame for anything. I saw them call him out of the dance hall and give him ten dollars to carry this message."*

Williams ceased, and glared at Hennessy. "Humph!" he grunted. "Them damn fools in Juarez! Tryin' to out-think an' out-guess Charles Burton. I'd sooner sleep in uh bushel o' rattlesnakes. Why, Burton knew this here letter was comin' before she was even wrote."

He referred to the script again. *"'Don't do anything to th' man who brings this note.'* He ain't to blame an' so on. Burton told me that, too. An' them babes in th' woods tryin' monkey business on him!"

"Wh-what does it all mean?" inquired Hennessy uncertainly. "I swear I dunno what it's all about."

"It means, young feller, in plain talk," Williams said heavily, "that this here Burleigh is fixin' to git his hind quarters in uh sling. An' you ain't two jumps from bein' in there with 'im..."

* * *

THE LOBBY of the hotel had been deserted when Rufus and Nellie arrived in Juarez. Leaving the girl, Rufus hurried to the telegraph office. When he entered, no sound greeted his ears except the spasmodic clicking of the telegraph instrument.

"Hello!" he called. "Where is everybody? Does everybody in town sleep during the day so they can stay up all night?"

"Hold yore hosses, whoever yuh are," squeaked the voice of Agent Huggins from beyond the door of his living quarters. "Comin' in uh minute."

Rufus was moving toward the dispatcher's office when at the sound of feet behind him he whirled around in sudden apprehension. At the sight of Buffalo Jones so close

upon him he shrank back against the railing in terror. Then Sue Burton was running across the room to him.

"We've been nicely trapped, Rufus," she said. "But don't worry." She added in a quick whisper, "No matter what happens, don't say anything about Nellie Gelding's warning. Father is coming with the sheriff."

"Wotinhell yuh talkin' 'bout?" demanded Buffalo Jones.

"Easy, Jones," cautioned Burleigh, and smiled at the girl. "I was waiting for Rundell, but I hardly expected you, Miss Burton. It will be a pleasure to entertain you."

"Wh-what is the meaning of this?" demanded Rufus quaveringly. "What do you want? I—we didn't come here to see you."

"Oh, but you did," corrected Burleigh. "Though you were not aware of it."

"I came here—"

"To get a telegram from your father," Burleigh finished. He tendered a slip of paper he took from his pocket. "This is not the message you expect, but it is an authentic wire from your father."

Dumbly Rufus took the proffered telegram and he and Sue read:

LEE GROVER, JUAREZ, OKLAHOMA, LETTERS RECEIVED. EXPECT ME JUAREZ THURSDAY
VINCENT RUNDELL

"Lee Grover?" said Rufus stupidly. "Why should he wire Grover?"

"Let Grover explain that"—Burleigh smiled significantly—"if he can."

"Thursday?" Sue exclaimed. "Why, your father won't be here today at all."

"No," assured Burleigh regretfully, "he won't be here today at all. I took the liberty of revising the telegram to suit a little matter I have in view."

Sue eyed him haughtily. "How dare you meddle with Mr. Rundell's affairs? Let's go, Rufus."

"By all means," Burleigh agreed. "Let's all go—over to my apartments. There are several matters I can explain, including Grover's implication in this affair."

"We prefer to return to the ranch," Sue said coldly.

"Later," said Burleigh, his voice suddenly hardening. "We are going to my rooms now. And I advise you both to come quietly."

"We won't do it!" Sue cried. "If I scream, somebody will stop you!"

"People here do not interfere with Dick Burleigh; are you coming?"

"No!"

Burleigh softly drew his breath between parted lips. His cold eyes dwelt on her face. Here was sterner stuff than he had to contend with in young Rundell. "I dislike physical force," he drawled. "Please do not make me employ it."

"We won't go!" declared Sue defiantly, and drew a deep breath to scream.

"Take her, Jones!" snapped Burleigh, then to Rufus: "One move from you, young man, and I'll carve your epitaph on your chest."

Buffalo Jones clamped his vast hand over Sue's mouth. As indifferent to her struggles as though she were a buzzing insect he picked her up and strode toward the door.

"Follow him," Burleigh commanded Rufus.

With a sob in his throat Rufus stumbled blindly after the husky Jones. Burleigh brought up the rear smartly. They hurried down the street and turned off to the house where Burleigh had established his quarters.

Once Rufus met Sue's eyes over Jones' shoulder. At the wild appeal in their depths he moaned impotently. Unable to sustain their glance, he dropped his eyes and stumbled along in burning shame at his wretchedness.

IN DICK BURLEIGH'S well-furnished rooms where his culture had triumphed over the drab equalor of his surroundings, the renegade surgeon secured Sue's wrists and ankles.

"I thrust you will not be too uncomfortable on that couch, Miss Burton," he said. "It grieves me to be

forced to employ any such crude methods with you."

Sue glared at him. "You'll pay for this outrage! What do you expect to gain by it?"

"You'll know presently. In the meantime, I advise you not to strain your lovely voice by shouting or screaming. Even if you were to be heard, no one would be foolhardy enough to make inquiries."

He had turned his back on Rufus contemptuously. Now he turned back. "Draw your chair closer to the table, Rundell," he directed. "Paper, pen and ink are before you. You are going to write a note to Charles Burton saying that if he will come and shoot out a little difference with me that that will automatically release you, and of course his daughter—though you will not mention her. If not—"

"Rufus!" cried Sue sharply. "Don't you do it!"

"You write as I dictate," said Burleigh smoothly, "and if Miss Burton finds anything objectionable in the note we shall compose another. Begin! *'Mr. Burton:'*... I said begin!"

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NERVOUSLY Rufus touched pen to paper and wrote the message that Williams later took away from Soupbowl Hennessy. As he finished Burleigh spoke to Jones.

"Take this letter to the *Garden of Delight*. Give Hennessy ten dollars to ride over to Burton's place and deliver it into Burton's own hands. You might add that Hennessy is only a messenger, Rundell; it may save an unnecessary killing. Now let me read it aloud. That sounds very appealing. You added a realistic touch in that prayerful phrase... Have you any particular objections to this note, Miss Burton?"

"You really mean you want to meet my father in a gun duel?"

"Precisely. Here on the main street of Juarez, instead of on the Burton ranch where I understand your father does most of his shooting."

"You'll never know what hit you," Sue said promptly.

"Perhaps not. Thank you for your encouragement. Here, Jones."

"Won't you let me add that Sue is here?" begged Rufus. "He won't come for me alone."

Burleigh shrugged. "He will come, never fear. If I have not badly misjudged my man, and the queer circumstances surrounding you both, he will be here before midnight... And say, Jones—did you get those hooks and chains from the hardware store this morning?"

"Uh-huh, shore did."

"Very well. After sending Hennessy on his way, go over to the *Pisa House* and put them up. If Gelding or anyone else questions you refer them to me. I'll be there after dark with Rundell."

Buffalo Jones nodded his shaggy head in understanding. Note in hand, and head still whirling from the memory of a girl in his arms, he departed.

"Chains?" Sue exclaimed, in swift apprehension. "What are you going to do with chains?"

"Let me explain," Burleigh said, seating himself so that he faced them both. "I will have no secrets from you. The chains to which I have reference are to hold Mr. Rundell upright at the front corner of the *Pisa House* facing the main street on this side. He will be gagged and chained there tonight after dark. This happens to be fortunately, the dark of the moon. His form will be visible to anyone coming along the street only by the lights from the *Garden of Delight* and the hotel, but it won't be recognizable.

"I have so timed the delivery of that message to Burton so that he cannot possibly get here before nine o'clock. It will then be dark. As he rides up toward the hotel I shall be standing around the corner where Rundell will be chained and, across

his manly bosom, I will open fire on Burton. I will instantly draw back behind the protecting angle of the house while your father riddles this gentleman with bullets before he can note his mistake. A simple little plan, isn't it? Direct and to the point. Mr. Burton is so good at subtle reasoning, I have taken a page from the blunt note-book of Buffalo Jones and will give him a subtle dose by being painfully direct.

"He may be a trifle tardy. If so, we will patiently await him; he cannot surprise us by a premature appearance. And then he will discover that he has killed a defenseless, unarmed, and bound man. And tomorrow Vincent Rundell arrives at the proper time to revenge himself for the death of his son, by sending the murderous Mr. Burton to the gallows."

BURLEIGH leaned back in his chair and beamed coldly upon his listeners. Rufus was spellbound with terror; Sue shivered.

"You—you had better drop that foolish plan," she said shakily; "Father may not come alone."

"After receiving that challenge? My dear young lady, you do your father an injustice. Undoubtedly he will ride into Juarez alone, regardless of how many men follow him. What if he doesn't? The result will be the same." He shrugged. "Rundell will merely be the recipient of more lead. What do you think of my plan, Mr. Rundell? Neat, isn't it?"

"Maybe he won't shoot," Rufus muttered.

Burleigh laughed shortly. "Won't return gunfire? Charles Burton? You are deluding yourself, sir. However, just for the sake of discussion, since we have quite a long wait before us, let's accept your hypothesis. Suppose Burton fails to return the shot which is obviously fired by you. Suppose his eyes are so keen that he recognizes you through the gloom, or his wits are so phenomenally alert that he smells treachery and fails to shoot.

"You understand that I won't fire the first shot until he is so close that I couldn't fail to hit him—if I tried. He will be no further away than the opposite corner of the *Pisa House*. Our mutual friend, Buffalo Jones, will be standing in the shadows between the hotel and that little shoe store armed with a double-barreled shotgun of my selection and doubly loaded by me. If Burton doesn't react as any sensible man would, Jones will kindly fill his carcass with buckshot at point-blank range.

"At the same time I will pistol you to make amends for Burton's oversight. Then we will unbind you, place Jones' shotgun in your hands, and my revolver, which is a duplicate of the weapon Burton carries, in Burton's hand, and there you are. Two men slay each other in gun fight; you lose and Burton loses either way."

The eyes of the two captives met and held in the silence which followed while Burleigh looked from one to the other mockingly.

"Rufus!" Sue gasped. "Do something! Can't you see that he means every word of it? Don't you see that he is mad? Oh, why don't you do something?"

"What can I do?" groaned Rufus.

"Do?" Sue said scornfully. "You are free and he is alone with us. He has no gun. He said that nobody would come to disturb us. Get up and fight him! He's not as strong as you are!"

Rufus merely shuddered. "Oh, you *are* a coward!" she stormed at him. "You asked me only this morning if I thought there was any purpose in life for you. This is the moment you've been waiting for. Now is the time to prove that you're a man. If you won't fight for yourself, fight for my father. Fight for me! You know he doesn't intend to let either of us live... Rufus, won't you *try* to fight for me?"

"Yes," chimed in Burleigh. "Come on, Rufus. Always favor a lady."

"If you won't fight," Sue cried desperately, "get away from here and spread the alarm! Go to Amos Gelding or Sam Hatfield. Perhaps

Uncle Lee is in town. Oh, God, can't you even move?"

Rufus strove with all his might to rise. His face was ghastly, his flesh clammy. Perspiration rolled down his cheeks and his features worked convulsively. He fell forward on the table and sobbed brokenly.

Burleigh gestured toward the girl on the couch.

"Please don't excite him further," he said distastefully. "Such a display of psychological fear is repulsive."

"You—you devil!"

Burleigh smiled and nodded as though he had paid him a compliment. He glanced at his watch and rose to his feet.

"We have quite a long wait yet," he remarked. "Would you care to read something, Miss Burton? I'll call off the titles of several novels I have and you can choose."

She did not deign to answer.

"You are ungracious," he chided. "I beg of you to feel that you have nothing to fear at my hands. *'Helen of Troy, know you not it is because of you I take up the gage of battle?'*"

Even this brought no response. He turned to the forlorn figure at the table. Rufus still lay with his head pillowed in his arms. "How about you, Mr. Rundell? Is there any way I can entertain you? I have cigars, cigarettes, wine, and newspapers. I have a month-old New York paper that might interest you. No?"

Rufus was too miserable to answer.

"Very well." Burleigh shrugged. "If you won't amuse yourselves, why then you won't. But you cannot accuse me of being an unthoughtful host."

He inspected Sue's bonds and threw a silk coverlet over her. Moving a comfortable chair to a spot where he could see both of his prisoners at a glance, he sat down with a copy of a well-known medical journal in his hands. Except for the sound of breathing and an occasional movement of one of the three a profound silence fell upon the room.

BURLEIGH tossed aside his magazine and rose to his feet. "It is eight o'clock," he announced. "Get up, Rundell! I am sorry to have kept you fasting, Miss Burton, but it wouldn't have been convenient to go to the hotel before the place is deserted. I shall return at once with food. Come along, Rundell."

Rufus rose and took one step in Sue's direction. His eyes pleaded for forgiveness and for a last farewell; she turned her face to the wall. Rufus turned and staggered out.

"Stand still until I lock this door." Burleigh commanded grimly, outside of the house. "And if sufficient courage comes to you at last to run or shout for help, don't succumb to the temptation. *Don't do it!* This knife will be within easy reach of your trachea all the time."

Rufus was in too great a state of apathy to flinch even from the keen, glittering blade. Without a word he shambled submissively at the side of his captor, indeed a lamb being led to the slaughter.

And in the room behind him a heart-broken girl sobbed aloud.

If there had been any doubts in Rufus' mind, which there were not, over the seriousness of Burleigh's intentions they would have been dispelled once and for all time when his conductor ordered a halt at the corner of the *Pisa House* while he felt against the wall in the gloom. The resultant clanking of disturbed chains proclaimed the fact that Buffalo Jones had obeyed his instructions.

Rufus could not understand his apathetic condition, nor did he try. He shuddered at the metallic sound of those shackles, but he entertained no idea of helping himself out of this awful and final predicament. Just as surely as he stood there in the pale starlight he knew that Dick Burleigh was his executioner, those rattling chains his official gyves.

He struggled no more than if he had been in official custody and awaiting legal execution.

And here was another trait not compatible with the usual coward-

ice. In extremity, the utmost coward would have fought for his life like a cornered rat; yet nothing aroused Rufus. His apathy was incomprehensible.

"It's ready," said Burleigh evenly. "Walk on. The far door. We will meet Buffalo Jones in the lobby."

But here developed the first hitch in the smoothly running plans. Buffalo Jones was not in evidence; there was nobody in the place except Amos Gelding. He looked up at their entrance, and then his face fell.

Burleigh pointed to a chair. "Sit down," he commanded.

Rufus complied and Burleigh looked sharply around the lobby, going to the doorway of the cafe and glancing in there.

"Where is Buffalo Jones, Gelding?"

"Buffalo Jones? I dunno. I ain't seen 'im since he was messin' with some chains here this afternoon. What I want to know is where is Nellie? You seen her this afternoon, Mr. Rundell? Dang it, th' gal's stayed away durin' th' supper hour an' I had to wait tables myself. One helluva note, an old man like me hoppin' around feedin' them animules. But I guess I oughtn't complain. Nellie's uh good girl. She oughta have uh vacation. She's been workin' steady for years. I'm goin' to send her to Oklahoma City for uh week."

"Have you been in the house all evening?"

"Been here?" snorted Gelding indignantly. "Didn't I jest git through tellin' yuh I been waitin' tables for hours in Nellie's place? 'Course I been here. An' I never seen such uh hungry outfit in months."

"Jones is supposed to be in this lobby right now," interrupted Burleigh harshly. "Have you seen him lately? Answer yes or no and say nothing further until I question you."

GELDING'S fat face was the picture of surprise. "My gosh!" he said. "I done told yuh no."

"Wasn't he in the restaurant for supper?"

"No."

"Have you any idea where he went?"

"No. Mebbe he didn't go nowhere. He might be up in his room."

This was a suggestion. Burleigh strode to the stairs and then thought better of it. He whirled on Gelding. "I want him here, and I want him quickly. Go up and see if he is there. He may be asleep—the stupid ox!"

Gelding waddled to the steps and pounded on the banisters with a heavy hand. "Jones!" he bellowed. "Buffalo Jones! Are yuh upstairs?"

He paused to listen, then shouted again. Burleigh glanced at his watch and had raised a hand to motion the fat innkeeper up the stairs when there was a surly response in Buffalo Jones' voice.

"Come down here!" bawled Gelding. "Dick Burleigh wants yuh!"

Heavy steps sounded and began clumping down the stairs.

"Gelding," Burleigh said, "go fix up a nice supper on a tray and have a man ready to carry it for me in ten minutes."

Gelding nodded and trotted out as Buffalo Jones reached the foot of the stairs and stood swaying. His clothing was disarranged, his eyes inflamed, and there was a peculiar gleam in them.

"Drunk!" Burleigh's voice stung like a whip lash. "At the one hour of your life when you should have been sober. You damned fool!"

"Damn' fool yoreself!" growled Jones. "Don't start callin' me names or I'll break yuh in two."

Burleigh smiled in cold amusement which was like a dash of ice water to the bellicose Jones. The doctor toyed with his watch chain, his slender fingers hovering just above his belt.

"I said that you are a damned fool and that you are drunk." He bit off the words nicely. "If I didn't need you now I would invite you to try to break me in two. It would be a pleasure to slice your gross belly to ribbons."

Buffalo Jones sobered a trifle. He grinned sourly. "I was jest talkin'

uh li'l fast, Dick. I ain't too drunk to tend to business, honest."

"See that you do," snapped Burleigh. "Do you think that Burton would let you off with a whole skin now—if he escaped us? In to the dining room, both of you. Wait there!"

Rufus stumbled into the cafe. Jones and Burleigh followed him closely, Burleigh carrying a heavy shotgun under one arm as though it were a Malacca cane. "Sit down at that table in the front corner," ordered Burleigh shortly. "You sit in the corner, Rundell. Sit down! Do you hear me?"

Rufus had passed the point where he could obey readily. He stared at his tormentor wordlessly. Buffalo Jones assisted him by shoving him down in the seat and placing himself opposite.

"Right," approved Burleigh. "Now you keep him here until I come back. I'll be gone just twenty minutes. When I return it will be time to set the stage for the gun expert. If any loafer comes in, send him about his business. We can't have any hindrance now."

"All right," Jones agreed, sullenly.

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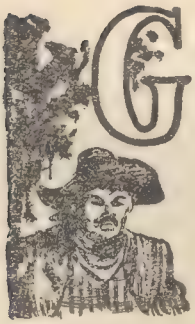


GELDING came in from the kitchen with a covered tray. He was followed by the cook who was removing a dirty apron. "Here yuh are, Burleigh," the hotel keeper announced. "George'll carry yore tray. Don't keep 'im because they ain't nobody here but me an' I don't cook. Gosh dang it! I wonder where Nellie went to! I'm beginnin' to git peeved. Yuh know—"

"I'll be back in twenty minutes." Burleigh cut in, turning his shoulder and looking at his watch as he spoke to Jones. "See that you don't fall asleep and let him get away. Come with me, George."

He strode out, followed by the man with the tray. Gelding stood still for a moment and eyed the two silent men in the corner dubiously. Then, thinking better of disturbing them, he waddled back toward the lobby. At the doorway, struck by a sudden thought, he turned and spoke to Jones.

"Call me, Buffalo, if anybody comes in, will yuh?"

"All right," rumbled Jones, never removing his eyes from the apathetic Rufus.

Another period of waiting ensued. Jones tilted a bottle time after time and gurgled noisily. He offered none to Rufus, made no effort to enter into conversation, seemingly deep in morose thoughts of his own. His vigilance, however, never slackened.

In his stupor, Rufus' mind was too exhausted to worry with conscious thoughts any further. His eyes were fastened on the shiny barrel of the shotgun on the table, the gun which Burleigh had brought from behind the hotel desk. He was fascinated by the design; he wondered what sort of a workman had carved the stock, or if it was a clever machine job. No, he had seen too many gun stocks made not to recognize the art of a wood carver.

The faltering, half-running, half-stumbling steps of Amos Gelding coming down the steps drew no attention from the drunken Jones or the numbed Rufus. It was only at his horse and agonized gasping in the doorway that Rufus was able to tear his eyes away from the gun and look up.

The hotel keeper's face was a study of unbelieving horror. He staggered toward the two men at the table. "Nellie!" he gasped. "Nellie—she wasn't gone all this time! Nellie! She's upstairs in her room, an' she's —My Gawd! I jest thought! You! Buffalo Jones, you! You was upstairs all this time. No other man's been up there. You—you—"

He choked over the words that would not come, and took another groping step forward.

The effect on Buffalo Jones was magical. He leaped to his feet and

whirled to face the wild-eyed Gelding. The peculiar gleam in his eye flamed up higher. He backed away until his shoulders touched the glass of the window which looked out on the street and he was parallel to the forgotten Rufus. "Yeh, I was up there," he snarled. "They ain't no call to act up this a way. I'm-a-goin' to marry th' girl.

"There were finger marks on her neck," went on Gelding in a far-away voice. "An' in her hands was some black hair from yore beard."

"Shut up an' set down!" bellowed Buffalo Jones. "I tell yuh I'm-a-goin' to marry her. She wouldn't be still so I had to choke her down uh bit."

"Choke her down uh bit?" cried Gelding in a sudden frenzy. "You—you dog, yuh killed her!"

"What?" howled the drunken brute. "Yuh're lyin'!"

Gelding's response was to crook his fingers and leap barehanded, the light of insanity in his eyes.

Buffalo Jones' right hand dropped to his hip. A thin steam of flame spurted toward the plunging hotel keeper; three shots followed so closely together that it sounded like one continuous roar. Amos Gelding, good-natured and garrulous owner of the *Pisa House*, crashed to the floor.

Buffalo Jones stared dazedly. "Dead!" he muttered. "Plumb dead! I got to have uh drink!"

He turned and fumbled for the door leading to the street just as the door to the kitchen was flung wide open. At last he succeeded in mastering the knob, stumbled out and staggered toward the *Garden of Delight*.

THIS, THOUGHT Rufus, was the climax. He was in a clammy sweat and deathly sick, but when he looked up at a figure which materialized at his side, he could have screamed. He was staring into the features of that specter of his dreams. The Wolf! The Wolf had come again!

With one swift move the Wolf reached out and snatched up the forgotten shotgun from the table. He thrust it into Rufus' hands with the recoil motion. One horrible glare he gave the horror-stricken youth from his hypnotic black eyes. He pointed through the open door at the wavering figure of Buffalo Jones in the street.

"Kill him!"

Without a word Rufus turned and raised the gun to his shoulder. Automatically he drew a bead on the head of the drunken killer, conscious of nothing but the complete domination of this master mind. Fear did not enter the young man's head; he had no thought but to obey.

The swaying Buffalo Jones was now across the street. He had missed the entrance to the *Garden of Delight* by many feet. He was clutching for the corner of the brick building when he swayed back in line with the shotgun. As he did, Rufus pulled both triggers. The recoil of the over-loaded gun knocked him back into the arms of his Nemesis, the weapon clattering to the floor.

The Wolf, supporting him easily, hurried him out into the street and held him upright. "Look!" he commanded. "Look!"

Rufus looked. The discharge of buckshot meant for Charles Burton had been fired at too close range to scatter much. It had struck Jones squarely at the base of the neck, completely severing his head from his body.

The Wolf and Rufus Rundell had met again. And the wild man from the fastenesses of Wildcat Mountain, had appeared like a black shadow from the nethermost regions to accomplish for Rufus something at which all others had failed.

Following the mad bellow of that double-noted gunshot, the silence seemed profound by contrast. The music and noise in the *Garden of Delight* died away and denizens of the place came crowding to the doorway; nobody ran recklessly out into the street.

FOR THE brief moment before curious faces crowded the door of the place the two men who had

come from the *Pisa House* stood alone and undisturbed in the center of the road. Then through the silence came the sound of running feet. Dick Burleigh emerged from the darkness.

"You, Rundell!" he shouted. "I saw you in the gun flash. Who was that you shot?"

"Buffalo Jones has met with disaster," said the man beside Rufus, as he thrust his leering visage almost in Burleigh's face. "What's it to you, you damn dude?"

Burleigh jerked as though he had been stung by an angry hornet. He drew in his breath sibilantly. "The Wolf!" he exclaimed in swift recognition. "You are mixed up in this."

"I am; how you like it?"

"So *you* had to bob up in Juarez and spoil my plans," said Burleigh icily.

"Yep me!" snorted the Wolf. "What you going to do about it? Why don't you jump me, you woman killer?"

Over and over in Rufus' mind one single fact kept repeating itself. He had killed Buffalo Jones. He had *killed* Buffalo Jones. *He* had *killed* Buffalo Jones. The man had deserved such summary justice; he, Rufus, had become the instrument of justice.

Instrument of justice? On the orders of a strange man who was surely criminally insane he had shot Buffalo Jones in the back. This revolting fact drove itself home. *He had shot him in the back!*

"Well?" he heard the harsh, grating voice of the Wolf saying to Burleigh. "Well, you dressed-up skunk! Where's your hell-fire now? Whyn't you knife me if I've gone and got in your way? Whyn't you cut up *my* body and stick it in a bonfire? Too bad there's no furnace out here. Maybe if we were back in Philadelphia it would be easier for you. Whyn't you start something? I'll tell you why you don't. You're afraid of me, you dirty wife murderer!"

Dick Burleigh was rigid with rage. In all the time he had known of this incomprehensible being called the Wolf he had never come into personal contact with him. Their tastes; their interests; their lives had nothing in common. Who the Wolf was, or even why he was, remained one of the mysteries of the badlands.

Nevertheless, Burleigh had seen the villainous hermit in action. He appreciated the Wolf's marvelous speed and accuracy. So reason and sanity held him rigid in the face of the taunts hurled at him. It was not fear that held his knife hand; it was caution.

It further shook Burleigh to realize that the Wolf was intimately acquainted with his past. He was flinging it into his, Burleigh's, face for the express purpose of goading him into a suicidal attack. There was something behind all this that Burleigh must dig out.

IT WAS AT this moment that the thralldom of Rufus Rundell to cowardice was canceled forever; the foundation of a new manhood had been laid. That shot in the back, no matter its cause, that culminating proof of cowardice became, paradoxically enough, the potent which dissolved the spell.

With a hoarse cry Rufus jerked out the six-shooter from the holster at the dead man's hip, leveled it at the Wolf, and pulled the trigger.

His shout had warned his victim; perhaps the man had been alert all the time, never forgetting that Buffalo Jones wore a gun which still contained three shells. The Wolf lunged to his knees, his hand flipped up the gun from the stitched-on holster and fired in almost one motion. Rufus' bullet had hissed harmlessly above him and close to Dick Burleigh.

The Wolf did not attempt to balance himself on his knees, instead, he continued in his forward dive, twisting onto his side after firing that one quick shot at his would-be assassin, pining his right arm beneath his head. But his left touched the ground, had brushed lightly against his left thigh like the flickering tongue of a snake. And Dick

Burleigh found himself staring down into the barrel of an efficient-looking six-shooter before he could draw his knife.

Rufus Rundell fell forward across the body of the man he had slain. Burleigh laughed. "You are wrong, my amiable friend," he assured the wary man at his feet. "It isn't fear that binds me; it is common sense. You are a wizard with your weapons. Put them away. You are the last man on earth I wish to kill."

Silently the Wolf rose to his feet, sheathed his weapons. He waited while Burleigh approached the two still forms in front of the *Busy Bee*, struck a match and held it within a few inches of the still, white face of Rufus Rundell.

There was no sign of life in the pale features; blood was welling down over one cheek from a most suggestive dark place up under his hair.

"When you start them you sometimes have to stop them. I see, Senor Wolf," he said briefly, arising.

"I stop anybody who gets in my way."

"So I observe," remarked Burleigh coolly. "You love everybody, don't you?"

"Start something."

"I shall," promised Burleigh firmly. "But not with you. I think I need you...Ah, I have it now! You are in the pay of Charles Burton. I see his hand in this. Your taunts showed that you know too much about my affairs. And the only person in this whole country who could possibly be interested enough to rattle the bones in my closet is Charles Burton. He sent you here to see that Rundell became a killer by killing me. From the results you had with Buffalo Jones I am willing to concede you might have succeeded. But the question is, why did you make him kill Buffalo Jones?"

"You're pretty smart, ain't you? Did it ever strike you that your ideas could run away with you?"

"Doubtless," admitted Burleigh, smiling triumphantly. "But they are not doing so at present. You were to see that Rundell killed me, but you messed up the job for some reason. Then you tried to remedy the error by taunting me into attacking you. You see, Senor Wolf? Don't enter a game of wits with me, my friend. You can out-shoot me, but you can't out-think me; why did you sick Rundell on Buffalo Jones?"

"If you must know," growled the Wolf malevolently, "Buffalo Jones killed Nellie Gelding and shot down the hotel keeper."

"What?" Burleigh was startled. "So you seized the opportunity of making a killer out of Rundell without waiting for me—a more difficult victim. And you thought you'd finish me yourself. What a lovely disposition you have! But let me tell you something you were not quick-witted enough to perceive. When you killed Rufus Rundell you ruined all the plans Burton had made. You made a killer out of the boy for nothing. And here is something you don't know. Rundell's father is one of the most powerful men in the United States; he will be here tomorrow. Can't you understand to what lengths he will go to avenge an only son? Burton can't save you from him. But maybe *I* can. Come into the eating house where we can talk.

THE WOLF strode after him without comment. At once the two waiting undertakers in the doorway of the *Garden of Delight* led the curious mob outside, and pounced on the two bodies in the street like starved cats leaping upon mice. At the door of the cafe Burleigh turned. "Don't fight over the remains, you obituary hyenas," he called out sarcastically. "There's plenty for both. Bring them into the hotel. There are two more bodies here for you."

He entered and closed the door after the Wolf, then looked down on the remains of the garrulous Gelding. In the doorway to the kitchen the scared face of the cook was visible.

"Where's the girl's body?" he demanded.

"From what I heard I'd say she's upstairs in her room."

"To think that Jones, with all his crudity, has beaten me after all! I noticed the sullen, morose gleam, in his eyes; I attributed it all to drink."

He cursed Buffalo Jones in the concise manner of a master of epithets.

"He'll fry in hell without your execration, all right," the Wolf finally growled. "Come to the point. What you got to say to me, anyhow?"

"Wait!" snapped Burleigh. Motioning to the undecided men in the archway to come in and remove the hotel owner's body, he said to them brusquely: "Buffalo Jones killed this man, and Buffalo Jones is dead. No questions now. Get out with this corpse and stay out."

He turned back to the Wolf and motioned him to the nearest table at hand.

"Sit down," he said. "Tell me—what time does Burton expect to get here to see the results of your work?"

"You may be smart," sneered the Wolf, "but you'll have to come again about this Burton you talk so much about—to find out anything."

"Are you still denying that you are his hired killer?"

"I'm not talking at all; you're the man who wants to talk."

"You are wise," approved Burleigh. "But do you understand your predicament? Do you realize what it means to have made an enemy of Vincent Rundell?"

"I see what you are trying to make me believe."

"You had better believe me, my friend," sneered Burleigh.

"I'm not afraid of anybody." snorted the Wolf contemptuously.

"But you want to live, don't you? If you do, I'd advise you to listen to me. I've already told you that Burton can't save you from Rundell. I can. How? You can safely leave that to me. Let me be frank. I want Charles Burton so dead he'll be cold before he hits the ground."

"What a lovely disposition *you* got," grunted the Wolf.

"There is no man hereabouts good enough to meet him face to face with a gun," went on Burleigh. "There is but one man I have ever seen who can beat him to the draw; that is you. Now, here is my offer. You ride out to meet Burton—you'll know where—and kill him. When you come back I'll give you five thousand dollars. And Vincent Rundell will arrive to learn that his son was killed by Buffalo Jones who is already dead. If you can bring back Burton's body, he will be the killer of young Rundell. I will arrange that. If you can't bring him back, Buffalo Jones will answer for the lay figure. Take this job and you're a free man with money in your pocket. Refuse, and swing. What do you say?"

The Wolf stared at him with hard, black eyes. Finally he nodded: "All right," he growled. "I'll take your job. But remember, you did all the talking."

"Fair enough," agreed Burleigh

The Wolf passed out into the street. Thoughtfully Burleigh tapped the table as he gave full rein to his meditations. The Wolf had shattered his plans completely, but at last Burton was to succumb to Dick Burleigh.

"That is going to be a magnificent gun fight," Burleigh murmured. "How I would have enjoyed being present to witness it."

18

THE LIGHTS in the big living room of Burton's ranchhouse reflected on the hardwood floor, casting their radiance on a most unusual sight. The fireplace bench; the rugs; and the small pieces of furniture had been cleared away from the middle of the floor; a blanket, appropriated from one of the beds upstairs, had been spread out. The three handsome floor lamps

in the room had been moved so as to shed their light directly on the covering. Sitting cross-legged around it, were four men in various attire.

Benny, the Burton mechanic, wore blue overalls and jumper. Bert Green, range rider, was clad in worn and shiny riding gear, his sombrero shoved back on his head and a quizzical expression on his freckled features. Readon, deputy sheriff, in plain black, had unbuttoned his vest and removed his coat. His deputy's badge on his suspenders, and his gun holster beneath the sagging flap of his vest showed occasionally.

Sheriff Mawson, of Stillwater, was in serviceable corduroy and laced boots. The sheriff was blue-eyed, portly, and cherubic of countenance. A cigar clamped between his teeth wrinkled one side of his face in a set grin. Good humor, good nature, and efficiency radiated from him.

The matter calling for so much light and attention, and the blanket, was a game of stud poker.

Music furnished a sort of obbligato. Chained to the grand piano by the medium of three interlocked handcuffs, stretching from one leg of the piano to one ankle of the player, Soup-bowl Hennessy was ecstatically running through his reportoire.

"I'll call yuh, Bert," announced Readon. "You, Sheriff? Thanks for th' contribution. Deal, Benny. Where'n hell did Williams go?"

"I dunno," said Benny. "He's been gone more'n two hours."

"It'll cost th' curious two bits to see th' last card," said Bert, tossing in a chip. "Which one o' you law-breakin' officers is goin' to try to draw out against uh pair of sixes?"

"Draw out?" snorted Readon. "Yuh jassack, this here is my pot. I done warned yuh; I'm raisin' yuh four bits."

"I haven't won uh pot for an hour," complained Sheriff Mawson, before whom most of the chips had accumulated. He stretched and glanced up at the clock on the mantel.

"I'll see yuh, Readon," said Bert, tossing in another twenty-five-cent chip.

Benny dealt a fifth card each to the two remaining players, calling out an ace and a six respectively.

"Check th' bet," drawled Bert confidently. "I got yore ace an' you got my six. What yuh goin' to do against uh pair o' sixes, ace high, Readon?"

"Bet uh dollar."

"Raise yuh uh dollar," announced Bert promptly; "no deputy sheriff is goin' to bluff me."

"See yuh an' raise two dollars."

"My gosh!" complained Bert. "This here is uh poker game for real money, feller. What makes yuh so reckless thataway? All I do is call. What yuh got?"

"Pair o' aces," announced the deputy, flipping up his hole card and pairing it with the last card dealt.

"Danged if I didn't go and let this here court-caller draw out on me," lamented Bert bitterly, as the deputy raked in the chips from the center of the blanket. "Yore deal, Sheriff."

"You peckerwood know what time it is?" asked Mawson, gathering up the cards. "If yuh don't, it's way after 'leven-thirty. I can't understand Burton's big hurry to git us here and then he don't show up himself. Where'd he go?"

"Up in th' hills, Williams said," offered Benny. "He said for yuh to wait till he got back."

"Uuuummm," murmured Mawson reflectively. "Up on Wildcat, eh? He's goin' to run into th' Wolf one o' these days an' leave his daughter uh orphan as well as cause me considerable inconvenience an' trouble to run down his killer."

THE NOISE of someone entering the house caused them to look up. It was the returning foreman. Williams came in and glared from poker players to pianist. His face was grim and there was a haggard look about his eyes. "That's one helluva way to guard uh prisoner!" he growled. "If he wasn't uh nut he could bust one o' th' windows 'fore yuh'd know he's gone."

"Nope," vouchsafed Mawson without turning to glance at the captive. "He's handcuffed to th' instrument. If he leaves, he'll have to take it with 'im. Look for yoreself, John."

Williams let out a bellow of anger that caused Hennessy's fingers to falter on the keys. "Yuh danged idjuts! Yuh've scarred this piano leg all up with them cuffs. An' look what yuh done to th' room in general. Where yuh think yuh're at? In uh stable?"

"Nope," opined Bert, grinning. "So yuh better git out 'fore th' boss comes back an' catches yuh in here."

"Jackass!" snorted Williams. "Yuh oughta had enough sense to wrap somethin' 'bout th' leg 'fore yuh snapped th' cuff on."

He began pacing anxiously up and down the room, hands clasped behind him.

"Tell me 'bout that Turner business, John," said Mawson, dealing the cards. "Want uh hand?"

"No!" exclaimed Williams impatiently. Then, in a milder voice, he told of the passing of the man Turner as Burton had told it himself.

"Uh-huh," mused the sheriff thoughtfully. "Wait uh minute, boys! I'm raisin' the ante uh bit. Haven't won uh pot for an hour. Thanks, John. Guess Turner jest met with an accident, sort of. Sent th' body back to Juarez? Uuuummm—that was right."

The game went on for a couple of hands while Williams continued to pace the floor restlessly.

"What's th' trouble, John?" demanded the sheriff suddenly. "Yuh got th' fidgits, an' yuh don't generally have 'em."

"There's plenty o' trouble," said Williams fiercely. "I might as well tell yuh. Sue Burton has been gone ever since her dad left along 'bout noon today. She said she was goin' for uh ride an' she rode clear off th' range. I'm afraid she's rode after young Rundell. Burton didn't tell me to keep her in th' house, but I feel to blame for her bein' gone."

"Th' hell yuh say!" exclaimed Mawson, getting quickly to his feet. "Whyn't yuh tell me that when I first got here?"

"It was only suppertime, then," said the foreman; "I thought she'd be back any minute. But she's gone, an' Burton's out somewheres in th' hills; he should of been back hours ago himself."

"If he ain't here by midnight, I'm ridin' over to Juarez," said Mawson sharply. "That's in ten minutes. Tell me what yuh know 'bout this business Burton wanted me to tend to for him."

"I don't know anything," growled Williams helplessly. "You know how close Burton is. I jest been obeyin' orders. I—"

"Here he is now!" cried Benny in relief.

CHARLES BURTON stepped through the door. The poker game was forgotten and the music ceased. Hennessy arose from the piano bench and crouched against the keyboard of the instrument, looking from the grim figure of the ranch foreman to the less grim but more forbidding figure of the rancher.

Burton was pale, but as calm and placid as though a tramp of twelve hours in the mountains while the law awaited his pleasure was a commonplace occurrence. His quick eyes took in the room and lingered on the timid Hennessy.

"So you were the messenger from Thermopylae," he murmured. "Unchain him, Mawson; he won't leave."

Hennessy was released, but continued to stand by the piano, staring at Burton fearfully.

"I am much later than I expected to be, Mawson," Burton apologized. "Let me assure you I didn't hurry you down here for nothing. I meant to be earlier, but I have been detained up on Wildcat until just now. Has Williams told you why I want you?"

"Gosh!" ejaculated Williams. "How could I? I don't know, except that we're goin' to ride herd on Juarez somehow."

Burton nodded. "We are going to round up the killers who have gone

berserk in Juarez today. I'll furnish you with all the necessary proof for conviction of any one we may take alive, Mawson. Sit down and I'll go into details as far as I can without having been present to see the outcome of certain plans laid by one Dick Burleigh."

"Mr. Burton," Williams said uneasily. "Mr. Burton, I—I—"

"Yes?" Burton raised his eyebrows.

"There's somethin' I must tell yuh. I—well, Sue rode off uh li'l while after yuh left this mornin', an' she ain't come back yet."

"What?"

"She tol' me she was jest goin' to ride out on th' range," Williams said anxiously. "When she didn't come back at suppertime I got uneasy. After supper I left the sheriff here to wait for you, while I rode out lookin' for her. No use. I'm afraid she rode after young Rundell. Sheriff Mawson an' me was jest figgerin' on startin' for Juarez."

Burton's face went dead-white. He swayed, his black eyes looking like two lumps of coal in a mound of snow. The clock on the mantel gave a warning *whir* and chimed out the hour of twelve.

"I told her to stay right here until I returned," Burton whispered hoarsely. "She never disobeyed me. Surely she wouldn't have gone to Juarez after I warned her."

He swung suddenly on Hennessy who almost leaped over the piano. "Can you tell me anything about my daughter? If you want to save your worthless hide, talk! What time did you leave Juarez? Did you meet her on the way? Answer me before I tear your heart out."

SOUP-BOWL HENNESSY now vividly remembered a picture he had seen through the window of the *Garden of Delight* that afternoon and had forgotten until this moment. He foresaw the end of his purposeless but none the less sweet life as this terrible-eyed man would terminate it as soon as he told what he knew. He collapsed against the piano bench, slipping to the floor in terror.

"Easy, Burton," cautioned Mawson. "He knows somethin' all right. Don't scare it out of his mind... Here, fellow! Take uh swig o' this. Now tell us what yuh know."

"She—she—that's who it was," chattered Hennessy. "I didn't git more'n uh glance. I didn't think no more 'bout it."

"Where did you see her?" commanded Burton.

"Gallopin' down th' main street o' Juarez," admitted Hennessy. "Follerin' right behind that Rundell feller—like she was tryin' to catch up with 'im. I went on playin' th' piano in th' *Garden o' Delight* an' in 'bout half an hour Buffalo Jones comes an' sends me here with uh note fer you personal from Dick Burleigh. I didn't think any more 'bout Miss Burton till this minute. Yore foreman got th' note—he'll tell yuh I'm tellin' th' truth. That's all I know 'bout it. That's all I come fer. An' now yore girl's in Burleigh's hands—an' I'm in yores!"

Burton flung his hands up before his eyes.

"My God!" he cried. "Three times I have had that devil under my hand and I have let him escape because I didn't feel warranted in killing him in cold blood."

"I take it we're leavin' for Juarez right now," Williams jerked out. "I'll git th' hosses."

Burton recovered himself quickly. His loss of self-control, the first that his men had ever witnessed, if anything, enhanced his strength of character because of the reason. "Exactly," he endorsed. "We'll take five of the punchers with us as well as the sheriff and his deputy. We'll clean up Juarez for all time. And we'll begin as quick as we can get there."

Mawson went to the door with the foreman and squinted at the sky. He came back and cocked his cigar at a jaunty angle.

"Yessir," he agreed. "We'll put th' blocks to that gang over there, but it won't be before mornin'. It's cloudin' up considerable. It's goin' to be so black goin' through them foothills that yuh can stick yore finger out an'

jerk it back an' hear it pop as th' hole closes up."

"That's right," agreed Burton quickly. "I noticed that a storm seems brewing. Benny, you and three or four of the men go around by road. We'll take the shorter way. But if the storm or accidents delay us through the hills, you'll get there in time to do some good when day breaks. You go with them, Readon."

"How 'bout Hennessy, Mr. Burton?" asked Benny. "Anybody goin' to take him along?"

"No, thanks," answered Soup-bowl for himself. "I'm goin' to stay right here till yuh git back with Dick Burleigh in chains."

Burton considered the unhappy piano player for a space. Then he nodded briefly and turned to the puncher, Bert Green.

"Bert, you stay and guard Hennessy until we return," he said.

"Aw, Mr. Burton," protested Bert quickly. "I—"

"Williams and I are leaving the ranch," said Burton tersely. "I must leave somebody here in charge that I can trust. I am depending on you. Are you going to fail me at this hour?"

Bert gulped noisily. "I'm stayin'." he declared vociferously.

"Now tell me quick 'bout all this rumpus, Burton," demanded the sheriff. "I want all th' details o' this here wild party. Here is that letter from young Rundell. Williams gave it to me. What's all this mean?"

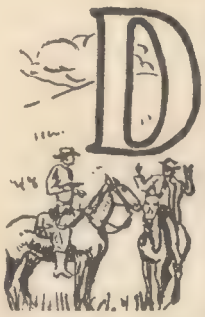
Quickly Burton explained all the incidents of the day so far as he knew them. Mawson estimated the meager facts, nodding wisely as he chewed and rolled his cigar about in his mouth. The clatter of horses' hoofs told of the arrival of the mounts and the departure of Benny, Williams, Readon, and two punchers.

Mawson and Burton started toward the door.

"Mr. Burton," Bert cried, "how about Rufus Rundell? Yuh ain't forgot pore ole Rufe, have yuh?"

"If God gives me back my daughter unharmed," said the ranchman prayerfully, "I'll save Rufus Rundell from anything!"

19



DURING the half hour that elapsed after Burleigh left his room with Rufus Rundell and returned with a tray of food, Sue Burton struggled desperately to release herself, but succeeded only in rolling from the couch to the floor. Whatever else Dick Burleigh was, he was a top-hand as a rope artist. She was helpless on the floor when he returned.

The key turned in the lock and the door opened. Burleigh entered with a tray and quickly kicked the door shut behind him. Placing his burden on the table he picked her up, laying her lightly on the couch.

"I hope you haven't been there long, Miss Burton," he murmured solicitously. "I am sorry. I will release you while you eat."

He unbound her hands and pulled the table against the couch. "Now then," he said briskly, "sit up and see what Gelding has prepared to tempt your palate."

"Don't bother," she said icily. "I don't want anything to eat."

"Very well," he said. "I have no time to coax you now. When I return you will find yourself hungrier, I have no doubt. Now I must truss you up again. Cross your hands!"

* * *

He had not been gone five minutes when the blasting rumble of a shotgun sounded out in the street. After an interminable time the stillness was broken by two pistol shots, two shots so close together that she fancied she had heard but one that had stuttered in some impossible fashion. Then there was no sound except the creaking of the house as it swayed before the night wind which swept in from the desert.

Leaden minutes dragged by, piled slowly into an eon while she lay bound and helpless on the couch. Something dreadful had surely happened! What could it have been?

She lost all count of time and how near to, or upon which side of midnight it was when at length the door was unlocked again she did not know. She was surprised at the relief she felt at the return of Dick Burleigh.

He came in and locked the door behind him. Glancing swiftly about the room, he opened the door of the other room and looked in there. Then, making sure that all of the windows were locked and the shades drawn, he sat down, drew a legal-looking document from his pocket and perused it thoughtfully.

"I have neglected you, I know," he said apologetically. "But my plans have undergone a drastic change, and I have been so busy I could not get here sooner."

"My father?" Sue begged anxiously.

"Has not yet arrived. I now expect him at dawn. If he gets here safely, there will be peace between us. This affidavit in my hands, sworn to before the notary public who did not read it, will insure our friendship—or armistice. At least after I keep it in a safe place—after your father knows of its existence."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that this is a paper which will send your father straight to the gallows if he raises his hand against me. Vincent Rundell would see to that if he had this document, and he will if anything happens to me. However, Burton could hardly turn against his own son-in-law anyhow, could he?"

"Son-in-law?"

"Precisely. The justice of the peace—an ironical office in Juarez—will be here at four o'clock to join you and me in matrimony."

Sue burst into laughter. "You—you are crazy!" she gasped. "I wouldn't marry you under any circumstances!"

"Oh, but you will." He smiled thinly. "When I prove to you what I have on your father you will be glad to see the justice of the peace."

Her face blanched in sudden terror of this demon. She shrank back against the wall.

"You wrong me," he murmured placatingly. "I shall not lay one finger on you in violence. I dislike a display of force; I have just witnessed a most revolting example of brutal impulses."

She stared at him with fearful eyes, then said defiantly, as a sudden thought came: "I couldn't marry you, even if I consented to do so. I am already married to Rufus Rundell. That is why I tried to save him from your trap!"

"Then you are a widow, Mrs. Rundell," he asserted easily. "Your husband is dead."

"Dead?" The room spun and a vast humming set up in her ears. Then, slowly, she became aware that Burleigh was supporting her with one arm while he held a cup to her lips with the other hand.

"Drink this coffee!" he commanded firmly. "Drink it!"

Automatically she obeyed that hypnotic voice. She scarcely tasted the hot coffee, but rapidly the mist cleared from her mind and her head became steady.

"Don't look at me like that," he reproached her. "I swear I had nothing to do with Rufus Rundell's death. Neither Rundell nor your father have suffered at my hands. Won't you eat something now?"

"Please—don't bother me," she whispered.

"Am I boring you to that extent?" asked Burleigh in gentle mockery. "You are going to sleep. Drink another cup of coffee and we'll talk. There are lots of things I'd like to tell you."

BURLEIGH drew a chair closer to the couch and sat down. He began to talk in a calm, soothing voice, dropping his cold, mocking air. He began by explaining the death of Rufus Rundell, leaving out the sordid details, glossing over the rest. Sue was startled at herself that she could listen with no more interest than she felt. Burleigh gradually insinuated that there was every reason

Sue should admire him instead of holding enmity toward him. And she listened with an interest which grew in proportion to her increasing languor.

Twice she tried to shake off his deadly fascination, and failed. There were a thousand reasons why she should hate and detest this man, but she could not concentrate on them. Then, with a sort of dumb shock, she realized that he was making love to her.

"You are very beautiful, Sue," he was saying. "You have spirit, you have intelligence, you have a deep, passionate nature. You were created to love and be loved. And I love you more deeply than any man you ever have or ever will meet."

"I — don't — know — what — has — come — over — me," she managed to drag out. "What — is — the — matter — with — me?"

"You are comfortable? You are happy?"

"Yes—I don't know."

"Yet you feel an emotion new to you? A sort of indescribable yearning?"

"Yes," she murmured faintly.

"The answer is simple, my dear girl." He smiled again his steely smile. "Your coffee was drugged."

"You — drugged — me?"

"You have not been harmed, my dear. I was once an authority on feminine problems."

He moved over to the couch where she was now sitting up, her hands and feet unbound. Casually he seated himself, sliding his arm about her waist. She made no attempt to resist. Gently he pressed her to him, then raised her chin and kissed her.

"The justice will be here at four o'clock to marry us," he murmured.

"No, no!" she cried weakly.

He had stopped her by kissing her again when there came the sound of running feet and the door bulged under a catapulted body. Burleigh looked up quickly.

The flimsy barrier burst open and a fearsome figure bounded into the room. It stood swaying on its feet, wild-eyed, and with one side of its head and face matted and clotted with blood.

"Great God!" exclaimed Burleigh in genuine horror. "Rundell!"

20

Rufus Rundell's return to consciousness was a long and painful road, a way swathed with opaque veils which at first were mere layers of black night through which he must pass. At length the interminable layers of curtains ceased to exist.

The pain that racked his body instantly assured him that he had not left his earthly vehicle. The howling and whistling of the night wind informed him that he was still in Juarez.

He raised his hands and began feeling of his head which was a mass of pain. The sticky feel and the smell of blood enlightened him on his injury. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to feel about the spot under his hair. A tiny stick pricked his finger and he deduced that he had fallen on his face and gathered up some debris from the street. And at that instant he touched a bare spot. He shuddered in swift comprehension; that stick had been a tiny sliver of bone.

For a while he lay still, recruiting strength as he considered the matter. The slug had grooved the bone as it tore along the right side of his head. It was what a gunfighter would have called a crease.

He felt about experimentally in the dark. He was lying upon a rough wooden slab. Groping beyond, his hands encountered nothing but space. He sat up, and the pain in his head almost made his fall, but his movement gave his bewildered mind an idea of his position. He had been lying on an undertaker's workbench;

they had thought him dead and brought him here.

He felt cautiously for the floor and stood upright. "I've got to get out of here," he groaned.

Feverishly searching his pockets for a match, he struck one, cupped it in his hands, then held it aloft. He saw so much that he needed better light to understand it. On a shelf he saw a candle. Striking another match he reached it before the flame burned his fingers and touched it to the wick; the light sprang into flickering being. He surveyed his surroundings. Although he was not sure of it until he went out through the door at his back, he was in the big room behind the lobby of the *Pisa House*, a place used by Amos Gelding for storage.

The accumulations of years were here. A space had been cleared in the center of the room where Rufus saw three deal tables and an iron bedstead. He saw, then, the body of Amos Gelding, the body of Buffalo Jones, the bare table he himself had just quitted, and the slender form of Nellie Gelding on the bed.

The tragedy came home to him in crushing force. He forgot his pain, forgot the wound that needed medical attention. Slowly, sadly, yet calmly he approached and stared down into the faces of the two Geldings, and the decapitated body of Jones. "I certainly made a mess of you, Jones," he mused. "Queer that I should feel so calm about it. What has happened to me?"

No answer. His thoughts went on: "I killed you. *I* killed you. I am a plain bloody killer. Rufus Rundell, the son of Vincent Rundell, the steel and iron magnate. Yet I feel more at peace, I have more confidence in myself than I have ever had before."

He stepped over and looked down at Nellie. "Yes," he whispered fiercely, "I shot him down like a dog, but I'll never be sorry I killed him. Never! Anyway, Burleigh now can't injure Burton...Sue! Burleigh has Sue! Just as Buffalo Jones—"

Memory, utter and complete, had returned to him. He staggered erect and leaped for the door.

His splendid physique now stood him in good stead. Emotion temporarily conquered the pain of his wound and the loss of blood. Like a pursued specter from the infernal regions he fled straight for Burleigh's house. Black as was the night and unfamiliar as was the little town he sped unerringly.

In Burleigh's windows a dull glow of light made the drawn shades translucent. He burst into the little hallway and, without pausing, hurled himself at the closed door which barred the way to Burleigh's living room. It opened and he stumbled forward in his headlong rush.

He swayed, and blinked to accustom his eyes to the light. Then he made out Burleigh sitting on the couch with the drooping form of Sue Burton on his lap. "Great God!" he heard the man exclaim as though he were viewing a ghost. *"Rundell!"*

GRIMLY Rufus closed the door, dragging a heavy chair across the threshold to hold it—and Burleigh realized the man's lethalness. With one swift move he thrust the girl behind him onto the couch and leaped to his feet. "I see I should have prodded that scalp wound; now I have to finish the job."

"What have you done to Sue?" grated Rufus. "What's the matter with her?"

"None of your damned business, you half-corpse!"

Rufus leaped at the doctor's throat, snarling like an animal. Instantly Burleigh went into a crouch. His hand flickered at his waist band and there was the wicked glitter of his stiletto. He held it close to his stomach as a duelist presents a rapier.

It would have been suicidal for Rufus to attempt to close with him, unarmed as he was; Burleigh could rip him to pieces. To hesitate would also have been fatal. Comprehending that instantly, Rufus continued his bull-like rush until he was almost upon the crouching Burleigh, fearing only that the man would throw his knife. But Burleigh had no such intention; he had learned to use a knife, not to throw it. Then, when

collision seemed unavoidable, Rufus dived headlong at the knife-wielder's feet in a football tackle.

Surprise attack though it was, Burleigh was too agile not to knife his opponent as he fell forward across the tackler's back. However, just as Rufus clutched the renegade surgeon's ankles, he recalled the wound on his head; if he struck the floor on that gaping, tender spot he would be knocked unconscious. Too late to tackle with his left shoulder underneath, nevertheless he violently twisted his body, using Burleigh's ankles and his own arms as a sort of swivel before his body settled to the floor.

This catlike twist doubtless saved his life. As they crashed together to the floor Rufus felt a hot flame sear his back; there was a metallic snap as Burleigh's knife sank into the floor and broke off at the hilt.

Burleigh cursed as he realized he had only a knife handle in his hand. Then he grappled at Rufus' legs, but Rufus had recovered from the numbing shock of crashing against the floor in his injured condition and rolled over. They closed in a furious grapple and tumbled frantically over the rug, thrashing wildly about, crashing into furniture.

A floor lamp toppled and Burleigh clawed his way to his knees and attempted to use it to brain his antagonist. Rufus lashed out one wicked into Burleigh's stomach and Burleigh dropped, gasping. Rufus scrambled to his knees and for a moment they slugged, viciously, endeavoring to crush each other.

WITH PURPOSE, Burleigh began to attack the right side of Rufus' head, and Rufus knew that at all costs he had to protect this vulnerable spot. This kept him from exerting all his efforts toward annihilation.

Neither man thought of asking for quarter; this was a battle to the death and both knew it. It was a grim fight, too furious to last long. Burleigh realized that he did not have the weight and stamina of the younger man; Rufus knew that he could not fight long in his condition.

Sue, aroused somewhat from her lethargy by the crashing of furniture and thudding of bodies, sat up and stared at the two writhing forms.

At last Burleigh broke away and groped on the floor for the handle of his knife. He found it and leaped for Rufus. With guard wide open he rushed in and managed to strike a glancing blow on the right side of the head, using the dagger head with its jagged fragment of blade.

The room darkened before Rufus' eyes. He staggered back and sagged at the knees. Had Burleigh been rational, he would have waited an instant and planted a blow between the eyes which would have felled Rufus. Instead, he drew back his arm and pressed forward for another blow. Rufus seized him and fastened his fingers about his neck.

Burleigh landed an ineffectual blow and jerked back violently. Rufus, too weak to resist, fell forward on him, never releasing his grip. Helpless under the weight of his combatant's body, Burleigh reeled backward across the table near the couch. Rufus crashed down on him, and for the first time had an opportunity to exert all his strength. Lying across the table, feet dangling on one side and head on the other, Burleigh was completely in his power.

Rufus shifted his hands from throat to chin, slowly levering himself erect. With the edge of the table against the back of his neck and two mighty arms pushing his chin up and back, while a hundred and eighty pounds kept his body from moving, Dick Burleigh's life narrowed down to the number of seconds his tortured neck muscles could resist the application of this Archimedean principle.

Abruptly, there was a sickening pop, and he went limp while his head rolled at a grotesque angle.

Overbalanced, Rufus shot headfirst over his vanquished enemy and struck the floor, the body of Burleigh tumbling after. For a moment there was silence. Then Rufus pulled himself feebly to his feet. He swayed over to the couch, holding to the edge of the table. "Sue," he mum-

bled thickly, "Whassa matter wi' you?"

The languor which held the girl was lifting. She got to her knees on the couch and clasped her arms tightly about his neck.

"I'm all right," she said tremulously. "It is you who are hurt."

"Wh-what d'he do to you?"

"He said he drugged me," she said quaveringly. "But it's all right now. You got here in time."

His harsh laughter cut through her words.

"It's all right now," he repeated in bitter irony. "Oh, yes, it's all right now. From the hands of a fiend into the bloody hands of a killer!"

"Rufus!" she cried. "Stop it! You are not a killer! You were fighting for your life—for me. Don't you understand?"

He suddenly fell senseless across the couch beside her. Frantically Sue tried to arouse him, but could not. Her own lethargy returned; her head dropped until it rested on the broad shoulders of the unconscious man.

That was how Charles Burton found them.

21

ONCE again Rufus Rundell opened his eyes to blink in the glow of the morning sun as the golden, warming shaft of light fell athwart his bed. Once more he regained consciousness to orient himself in, and to, the guest room he had formerly occupied at the Burton ranch. Again the sounds from below and from outside signified that another day was well on its way. Again a man was seated at his bedside, waiting.

But here the similarity ended.

Instead of the athletic, sinewy Charles Burton this was a heavier, broader man of lesser stature. An older man with heavily lined face and white hair. Rufus stared at him with mingled emotions. "Father!" he exclaimed.

"My son!" Vincent Rundell said, as his hand gently touched Rufus' own.

For a moment there was silence in the tension of their reunion. Rufus was the first to break it. He struggled to a sitting position. "When did you get here?" he asked.

"Last night," answered his father. "I came as soon as I received your letter and the one I thought was from Grover. Lie down son. Don't exert yourself."

Rufus obeyed. He knew his throbbing head was neatly wrapped with bandages. He shuddered in memory. "Last night," he whispered. "While I was in Juarez."

"No." His father shook his head. "You were there two nights ago."

"Sir? Have I been unconscious a day or two again?"

Rundell nodded. "And if it hadn't been for Sue Burlington I doubt if you would have pulled through."

"I know it," Rufus agreed soberly. "But—unconscious! This is getting to be a habit." He grimaced.

His father slowly shook his head. "I have never understood you, Rufus," he said: "Here you are jesting at the narrowest escape from death you ever had... How did you manage to win the love of such a girl as Burlington's daughter?"

"I haven't."

Rundell raised his eyebrows. "The young lady thinks differently. Don't try to conceal anything from me. I have heard the whole story—how you have conquered your yellow streak in some fashion, and saved that girl—with your bare hands. Don't be a fool now; I want that girl for a daughter-in-law."

Pale and drawn, Rufus gazed at his parent with agonized eyes. "Wh-where are they now?"

"Waiting to come back into the room," answered the elder Rundell. "They left me alone with you when you showed signs of awakening. I have waited until you could hear it to do what I intend to do."

He arose and went to the door before Rufus could protest. Charles Burton strode into the room, and approached the bedside. With a warmth in his fine eyes that Rufus had never seen there before he held out his hand. Rufus slowly accepted it.

"My boy," the rancher said simply.

Then Sue was there, with her arm about his neck...

AFTER AN interval they came back to the bed. Vincent Rundell cleared his throat. He was given instant attention. "I wish to say," he began in a quiet and, for him, humble voice, "that I made a mighty big mistake twenty years ago which has turned out to be a most fortunate error for me. Nevertheless, the fact remains that I erred. I must rectify my mistake, as far as it lies in my power. Charles Burlington, I owe you the deepest apologies, which I hereby make. I owe you material wealth you do not need. However, I must make restitution. I have made the Burlington Arms Company a corporation ten times the size and worth of the business I took away from you. I have already wired instructions to assign seventy-five per cent of the stock over to you. Will you accept it?"

Burlington met his ancient enemy's gaze with a level glance in which surprise slowly turned to admiration. "I shall never leave this country," he said deliberately. "It has absorbed me. But Vincent Rundell, I will accept your offer and your friendship. And I have a use for the controlling stock of the Burlington Company."

They clasped hands. "But—but there is something I must say," objected Rufus. "None of you understand." He groaned. "I—"

Burton silenced him with a swift gesture and a commanding flash of his eyes.

"Even you don't understand, Mr. Burton," Rufus said bitterly. "I... Oh, let me speak to you alone, won't you?"

Burton glanced at his daughter and at the confused elder Rundell. "If you will leave us for a moment?" he murmured.

He sat down on the side of the bed as the others left the room. He laid a kindly hand on the wounded man's shoulder. "Well?"

Rufus licked his lips nervously. "Who brought me here? You?"

"Burton nodded.

"If you had known everything you would have left me there to die," said Rufus, "It would have been kinder. I am a killer. I killed Buffalo Jones—shot him in the back. You must believe me; I am not delirious. Burleigh saw me do it."

"And Burleigh—is dead," added Burton significantly.

"I killed him, too. I'm not sorry for either job—I'd do 'em both over again. But if only I hadn't shot Jones in the back! If only I'd killed him with my bare hands!"

"You could not have accomplished it, my boy," said Burton softly, shaking his head. "That beast was a veritable missing link. Get to the point that troubles you."

"Get to the point? Why—why, I'm a killer. I've got to go to the gallows for it. That's all there is to it."

"The only witness is dead," Burton repeated; "you were justified in your deed on all counts."

"I can't help that. Can't you understand, sir? I can't marry Sue. I can't even go on living. I *must* give myself up to the law."

"You are drawing too fine a distinction." Burton frowned. "The whole mess is cleared up to the satisfaction of all concerned. Sheriff Mawson has figured out that Burleigh killed Jones, and later stumbled against the table in his apartment and broke his neck."

"Does he—actually believe a ridiculous thing like that?"

"Well"—Burton smiled—"I pieced out the places where he was uncertain. Between us we covered the entire case. Mawson is highly pleased with his powers of deduction. He is a capable man, by no means a fool."

"And you mean to say you will hush this up and let a killer marry your own daughter?"

"I am certainly willing for you to marry my girl," answered Burton, choosing his words carefully. "I know what I know; I have seen what I have seen. And—I have learned what I have learned."

"Well, I won't do it," Rufus informed him bluntly. "I am going to tell the sheriff the true facts at once."

"On the contrary, young man," stated Burton in grim finality, "you are not going to say one word about the matter."

RUFUS swung his feet from under the covers and to the floor. His jaw jutted out firmly.

"You would give up the love of a girl like Sue?" Burton inquired. "You insist on going through a drop in the scaffold with a rope about your neck?"

"I must. If that is the penalty I am called upon to pay."

"I have been deceived in you," went on Burton in a cold voice. "I see that you do not love Sue, and choose the gallows to escape her."

Rufus gritted his teeth. He glared up at Burton out of haggard eyes, then dropped his head between his hands. "Why do you torture me like this?" he groaned. "Can't you see it is hard enough to do what is right?"

"You consider it right to break Sue's heart? To break your father's heart? Get back in bed and forget it."

Rufus rose to his feet, looking around for his clothes.

"You are adamant in this foolhardy decision?" asked Burton.

"Can't you understand?" cried Rufus pleadingly. "I couldn't go on living with such a—thing—hanging over my head. As stern as you are, you are just, Mr Burton. And mere justice demands that I stand trial for killing Buffalo Jones... Call my father and Sue back and tell them while I still have the strength to answer for my crime like a man."

"No."

"Don't, then. I'll do it myself."

"And I refuse to let you."

"I demand my clothes. I am leaving here immediately. You are violating the law by aiding and abetting a criminal."

"I shall not let you go."

"Try to stop me!"

Man to man they stood there, glances locked in a battle of wills. Although Burton made no sign he was secretly delighted at the young man's attitude.

"Very well," Burton sighed reluctantly. "If you are bent on this absurdity I suppose I can't stop you. However, you are too weak to go until tomorrow. I want you to take a little walk with me this afternoon to help get your strength back. Promise me not to breathe a word of this to anyone until we come back. Promise me this, and I will not oppose you any further."

Rufus considered this carefully. Then he nodded.

THAT afternoon while the sun was still high in the heavens, despite the protests of Sue and Vincent Rundell, the two men left the house.

"Where are you going?" Sue finally demanded when she saw she could not deter them.

"Just up in the hills for a short distance, my dear," Burton replied.

"Rufus," she said, catching the young man by the lapels of his coat. "Rufus, what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," he mumbled, refusing to meet her eyes.

"There is, too; there is something cold, something strange about you. And you haven't really told me you love me—yet."

Rufus looked dumbly at Burton for aid.

"He does, though," stated the ranchman positively. "And he'll tell you so when he comes back... I see Grover riding up the road over there. Take Rufus' father and introduce him to the man who was supposed to have written him a warning."

He kissed his daughter tenderly and led Rufus toward the rear of the house.

"This way," he directed, leading the way up the mountain. "And take it easy; it's a bit strenuous and you're still pretty weak."

For the first time Rufus climbed up toward the heart of Wildcat Mountain. In all the excursions he had made with Sue they had never ventured up into the rugged hills. Just what Burton's idea was Rufus did not know.

It was not far that Burton took him, perhaps two miles from the ranch buildings, but the way was all but impassible. How the ranchman kept from getting lost Rufus could not understand, until Burton paused on the crest of a high point and turned about.

The distance straight down could not have been more than half a mile. They had been forced to climb in a roundabout way to reach this aerie.

"What a wonderful view!" he exclaimed. "This is the most beautiful sight I have seen in this country."

"Isn't it?" agreed Burton quietly. "I have come to love it all just as if I had never known anything else."

They gazed for a time in silence, each busy with his own thoughts.

"Rufus, my boy, is your resolution to confess to killing Buffalo Jones still unshaken?"

The younger man's jaw hardened. "I thought that was settled; "you promised—"

"—that I would not hinder you if you came up here with me," supplied Burton. "And I won't. But first you must realize exactly what you are doing. Without splitting hairs tell me who is really to blame for the death of Jones. You—or the Wolf?"

Rufus stiffened. "I shot him."

"Admitted. But are you more to blame than the man who made you pull the trigger? Answer honestly."

"N-no," I suppose not. But I shall answer for my participation in the deed; I am not interested in what the Wolf does."

"You will be shortly," replied Burton slowly. "You admit that morally he is as much to blame as you, if not more?"

"Y-yes."

Burton looked out across the rugged hills. An eagle was flying high, glinting in the sunlight.

"What would happen, son, if you were to imprison that bird?" he asked. "What would he do?"

"I guess he'd die," Rufus answered, puzzled.

"Exactly. And so would his young ones, doubtless. Bear that in mind while I tell you a few things. No matter how intimately we humans become associated with one another we can never get out of the prison of our skulls. Do you realize that? As much as we see and know of the other fellow we are forever alone, prisoners in an inescapable prison with our inmost thoughts. There are many secret places in the soul of each man which are hidden from his fellows. Psychology today is trying hard to seek these places out but we will never succeed in understanding fully the other fellow as long as we are this material. No matter how simple the other fellow is or how much he talks there will be umplumbed depths to his nature and unexplored fields we cannot touch. Why? Because it is an impossibility to climb into his mind and think with him, and use the conscious and subconscious thoughts and impulses he has stored away."

"You speak clearly," said Rufus.

"This is the point I'm getting to—the matter of you and me. When you first came to the ranch I couldn't make up my mind what to do with you. Finally I decided to see that you killed Burleigh and went to the gallows for the crime. I selected Burleigh because he needed killing, and I was afraid my enmity for your father might fail me at the last minute, and I knew I could save you if I would."

RUFUS was astounded at this calm revelation. "I can't believe you!" he gasped.

Burton smiled sadly. "I am not going to lay bare the dark places of my soul," he said gently. "Neither do I want to learn any more of yours than I have seen. I'll just say that my hatred failed me at the last minute. But for your own sake, for the manhood which I knew to be latent with-

in you, I forced you to kill Buffalo Jones, hoping that the shock would snap the thread of cowardly inhibition in your character. It was a desperate remedy, but it worked."

"You forced me? *You* did? What do you mean?"

"I mean that *I* am the Wolf."

"You?" Rufus cried, horrified. "You? I don't believe you."

"Of course you don't," said Burton patiently. "That is why I brought you up here to prove it. Not another soul in the world knows this but you. One man guessed it. I feel sure—though we will never know for certain—by comparing the diving draw of the Wolf with the draw he had seen Charles Burton make when he killed Turner. He saw this Turner affair from the mountain east of here with a pair of field-glasses. And you killed this man before he could make use of his shrewdness—if he did know. Here is an affidavit he made. I found it before anyone else had a chance. Read it. Either he was making a shrewd guess or he *did* know, in which case all of my life's work would have gone for nothing. As I said when he had Sue in his hands."

Dazedly Rufus accepted the paper and perused it. When he had finished he looked up at the fine features of Burton and shook his head. "I still can't believe it."

"Look behind you," said Burton.

Rufus turned. There, in a little hollow on top of the high ridge, almost hidden by the thicket of scrub oaks and cedars, he saw a little cabin. "The lair of the Wolf," said Burton. "Let's visit it."

They descended the few steps from the shoulder of the slope at once losing sight of the vastness of vistas around them, and entered the cabin. The single room was meagerly furnished. There was a chair, a table, a cot, a small chest, and an excellent mirror.

"Sit down," directed Burton.

He drew a key from his pocket and unlocked the chest, throwing back the lid. Rufus stared with startled eyes as Burton began pulling black garments out of the chest.

"Do you recognize this?" Burton inquired. "And this? You should." He drew out a black leather shoulder holster, then black boots, and the familiar black Stetson. "And these?" he added.

"But—but the black stubble of beard?" queried Rufus. "That awful scar? How about them?"

Burton picked up a large make-up box and pointed to the mirror. "Crepe hair and flexible collodion," he informed. "I have become quite an artist in ten years."

"Ten years? You have masqueraded like this for ten years?"

"I have. And I had better tell you now that while I created the Wolf, a vicious and turbulent creature and one who has shot as many men as Charles Burton has, he never killed a human being without just cause. His principal reason for existence was to keep desperadoes off the mountain. If I had left them get up here, think of what they would have done to Burton valley."

"I see." Rufus nodded slowly. "And so you made me shoot Buffalo Jones. You creased me with that shot; you merely meant to knock me out and not kill me."

"Exactly. But in the poor light I came a little closer to killing you than I meant to. And, about Jones. If you had failed to shoot him as I told you to, you may set your mind at rest forever that I would have shot him down without calling out for him to turn around. You will remember that he had already crossed my path and had received his warning. That crime of his sealed his death warrant. I was entering the *Pisa House* through the kitchen; I couldn't get there in time to save Gelding's life.

"That is the whole story. Now, if you still insist on giving yourself up for killing Jones, go ahead. It follows, naturally, that I will surrender my own life to save yours. If one of us goes to the gallows it shall be me. Of course, I think I could win a pardon, but it will be my neck that will be in danger; it will be Sue's disgrace instead of yours. Remember what I said about that eagle and the

young ones left in the nest? What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" cried Rufus.

BURTON smiled for the first time since coming up on the mountain. "You can go back into the valley and tell a certain young lady what she is waiting to hear. Then you can accept my newly acquired stock in the Burlington Arms Company as a wedding present. You are going to be the new president of that corporation."

"God forbid!" Rufus shuddered. "I never want to see a firearm again."

"On the contrary, you are going to manufacture them. You have seen what terrible crimes can be committed with a gun, and you have learned how the honest citizen can use it to protect his property and preserve the laws of his country. Do you think the lack of a gun would prevent animals like Jones and Burleigh from committing crimes? In fact, Burleigh did not favor the six-shooter. No, it wouldn't. And yet it would keep physically weaker men from protecting themselves. Would you have attempted to slaughter Jones with an ax?"

"No, you wouldn't," Burton went on grimly. "No peaceful citizen would. The day of legalized battle axes is long gone. But you would take guns out of the hands of good men and leave them defenseless against the knives and axes of creatures like Jones."

"Stop—stop!" cried Rufus in anguish. "I must think! I *must* think!"

"You will find me out in the sunshine," said Burton quietly.

He went out and closed the door after him. For half an hour he sat on a boulder and gazed out over the fertile valley that his own efforts had transformed from a wilderness into a paradise. This man also had a problem to face.

However, he too, had reached a decision by the time Rufus opened the door of the little cabin and approached him with slow steps. He arose and turned to await the young man.

"Well?" he inquired gently.

Rufus came up and stood beside him. The boyish look had gone from his face.

"You have left me no alternative, sir," he answered soberly. "My lips are sealed; but I shall never be able to forget the death of Buffalo Jones."

"My son," murmured Burton. Putting his arm about the stalwart young shoulders, he drew Rufus close. "It is not necessary for you to forget it, boy. Remembrance will teach you to think carefully before you set your feet upon an irremediable path, before you carry out a drastic plan. And, at the same time, you must not forget that you owe that incident a debt of gratitude. It gave you the manhood to which you are by nature justly entitled... Let's bury the secret which lies between us two."

Thrilled by the regard and friendship of the most vivid and impressive man he had ever met, Rufus followed Burton down the slight declivity to the little cabin. He watched him rend garments and smash furniture, piling it all in the middle of the floor. A can of coal oil from one corner of the room completed the pyre.

"This oil was waiting here for this very purpose," said Burton.

In another minute a roaring blaze wrapped the entire structure in its obliterating flames.

"Fire, as Zoroaster said, is a great purifier," commented Burton gravely. "The past is past, irremediable. It is the future only that we must face, and accept without whimpering over the fate that God allots us."

Afterward, as they turned about and gazed down on the valley the sun was lowering toward the west. A lone figure stood out in the open on the little knoll before the ranch-house, seeming to be searching the mountain with anxious, eager eyes. It was Sue.

Together they started down the mountainside. Together they had been born anew in the fiery crucible of life, Burton to travel onward, Rufus to face the future squarely, hand in hand with the girl who waited below.

THE END

GUNSMOKE and DYNAMITE

by C. H. Cogswell

Jim Evans knew he was being suckered into a fight for a frame-up killing, yet, he couldn't let Slaber and Gorman get away with beating up a kid...

"THERE'S a hundred kind of fools and I'm all of 'em," Jim Evans told the bartender. "He hasn't come yet?"

"Nope, nary sign of 'im—sure it's a him? Man don't make a hundred kinds of a fool of his self over another man."

"Yore right, Pardner," Jim smiled derisively, "and my face is red. What I should do is bend over and let you kick the daylights outa me, then fork m'horse and ride back to the JE and get some work done for a change."

"Yuh ain't talkin' t'me," the bartender stepped back a pace. "I'm careful who I'm kickin'. I remember what yuh did to them three hombres Rafe Gorman brought in t'get yuh. But go on with your story."

Evans looked embarassed. "Maybe I shouldn't tell it because you'd think I was braggin' but it's been bottled up inside me so long now I gotta tell someone.... Did yuh ever stop to think, Pardner, how useless a man is without a woman?"

"Sometimes I ride out in the mountains on a pretty day," the bartender agreed.

"Well, yuh know how it is in this country," Evans went on. "There ain't hardly any women at all, much less enough t'go around. I was workin' in the mines over at Dobie Wells, savin' my money to make a stake t'buy some land t'settle on. There was a pretty little blonde number named Dolly Toller workin' at the *Diamond Bar,* dancin' and singin'. I fell for her hard like a yearlin' when it hits the end of the rope. She busted me good and plenty. I ain't got over it yet."

"I know what yuh mean."

"No," Evans stopped him with a gesture; "she wasn't that kind at all; that's why I took it so hard I guess. She told me the truth—she was married to a gambler named Frank Hemish."

"Well, that's the end of that." The bartender began to wipe the bar with a damp rag.

"No, it ain't the end," Evans persisted. "When I left her I told her that if she ever needed me or if there was anything I could do for her to just let me know."

"No sensible woman would ever hold a man to a promise like that," the bartender argued. "Best t'forget all about 'er. If yuh don't yuh'll probably end up under the table like any common bar room bum. Besides yuh've got enough trouble on yore hands with Gorman. Yuh can't win Jim, yuh just can't win."

JIM EVANS stiffened at the words. "All my life, Pardner, I've been doin' things folks said couldn't be did. I'll whip Gorman and his crowd down to his boot soles—I've tried to be fair with him about that water even though I knew he crooked Tony Alvord out of the land on the other side of the ridge. The water is mine. I got the little Buffalo sewed up when I bought my spread. I'm entitled to all the drainage on my side of the ridge.

"That was where Tony Alvord had the joke on Gorman. He knew that the land

Gorman cheated him out of wasn't worth much without water, and he'd already sold the water rights when he sold me my land. Of course Tony was a gentleman—if he'd kept his land I'd have been willing to share the Little Buffalo with him."

"But the same thing applies to you," the bartender reminded him. "Gorman's got plenty of money to hire gunmen. Suppose now, just suppose he decides to cut yore water off. Where will you be?"

"I've been thinkin' about that too," Evans sipped his drink, "I'll bet it took a thousand Indians ten years to change the course of the Little Buffalo so it would go over on the other side. A stream always seeks its natural course; it's a wonder to me that it ain't done so years ago."

"It would be a shame to undo all that work." The bartender looked at him suspiciously. "Folks don't give the Indians credit for knowin' anything but when it came to irrigation—"

"Yeah," Evans admitted, "it would be a shame. A lot of valuable land over on the other side. But then, I need water, too, and as I said, a stream always seeks its natural course. I always keep my word Pardner, always keep my word. But remember this, I made my deal with Tony Alvord who was a gentleman and honest; not with Rafe Gorman!"

"Yuh always was honest with me," the bartender agreed, "I'll vouch for that; but I'm afraid Jim yore fixin' t'get yoreself shot full of holes. Why don't yuh sell out to Gorman and move on? There's plenty of good land yet."

"I was doin' good over at Dobie Wells," Evans told him grimly. "I got mixed up with Dolly and because I didn't want trouble, because I couldn't stand the pain of seein' her, I left. I wasn't runnin' away from her Pardner, I was runnin' away from myself."

"I've heard of it but this is the first time I heard it with my own ears and saw it with my own eyes. Man can't run from his self Jim cause he's already caught. Sure yuh ain't had too many drinks?"

Evans grinned. "Think I'm daft eh? Does sound foolish don't it? Well put it this way. No matter where yuh go or what yuh do yuh can't avoid trouble and pain. All of us, I don't care who we are has to have a certain amount of trouble and pain, it's part of livin'."

"I get it," the bartender brightened. "Yuh been side steppin' trouble all yore life, runnin' away instead of standin' and fightin'. Now yuh think yuh'll make a stand."

"That's right," Evans picked up the bottle. "This is the end of the trail for me. Dolly's brother Ned is in some sort of trouble; I don't know what. Accordin' to my promise I'll have to help him if he comes my way. It puts me in a tough spot, Pardner, a mighty tough spot. Generally, the right kind of man don't need help; the other kind ain't worth helpin'—and right now I can't afford to carry the wrong kind. Why if Gorman knew about it, he'd hire him t'put a bullet in my back or—"

"But how can yuh tell?" The bartender was puzzled.

"I don't know," Evans admitted, "but I'll just stick around and keep quiet. Sooner or later he'll turn up and I'll look him over. Funny thing is, I don't know what he looks like—don't know a thing about him. For now I'm a drunk sleepin' off his jag. If anyone of Gorman's crowd turns up, whistle." He went to a far corner of the bar room, taking the bottle and a glass with him, leaned far back in a chair, cocked his feet up on the table before him and was soon fast asleep.

WHEN THE bartender's whistle aroused him, Evans pushed back his hat a little so he could see out from under the brim but still kept his face covered. Gorman, one of his men called Jud Slabber, and another of his toughs came in, the guns at their hips tied down. They were boistrous and swaggered to the bar. There was something about Jud Slabber that made little shivvers crawl up and down Evans' back. Since his fracas with the three gunmen that Gorman had brought in to get him, Evans had tried to side-step further trouble but it came to him then with the sureness of fate that it would be impossible to avoid a showdown with Jud Slabber.

Outweighs me by forty pounds, Evans judged as he studied the huge beast moving along the bar. *Gorman brought him here to run me out of the country. With a gun I believe I could beat him but with my hands—I'm not exactly scared; but he's awful damn big!*

Then, for the first time Evans noticed

the stranger at the bar—a youngster not more than twenty, dressed in cowboy finery which had seen the abuse of a long journey. The youth was having a drink when the three came in. Slender and a little over average height, he still looked small along side the huge Slabber. "Whiskey!" shouted the huge man. "Whiskey and make it quick!"

The bartender slid a bottle down the bar and quickly placed three glasses in front of the newcomers. Gorman, clean shaven and suave looking compared to his two companions glanced covertly toward Evans. He was a big man, too, but fat; his eyes were blue, small and greedy. A look of satisfaction came over his florid face as he downed his drink. *This is it,* Evans said to himself. *It looks like some sort of a frame-up. Well, we might as well have a showdown now as later!*

"Move over," Slabber roared as he hurled his body into the stranger at the bar.

"Sure Mister, sure," the boy responded evenly, "plenty of room." He moved two steps along the bar. The other two crowded against Slabber and again the huge man moved toward the stranger. The boy's jaw thrust out belligerantly and admiration surged over Evans as he watched; this stripling was not going to move again!

Slabber hurled his body sideways again, suddenly and violently colliding with the smaller man. This time it sent the youth staggering. He clutched at the edge of the bar and almost fell. "I said move over," Slabber roared again angrily.

"Plenty of room," the boy said, his voice breaking with fear or anger. "You move over!" He tossed the contents of his whiskey glass into Slabber's eyes and reached for his gun. A huge hairy hand flashed out and seized his wrist; a quick jerk and the gun went spinning. A deep-chested, brutal laugh filled the room followed by a bone crunching blow. The force of it sent the boy flying across the room into a card table upsetting it with a crash. For a moment the boy lay still against the wall as if dazed and bewildered; but he was not out. With the agility of a cat he was on his feet, his fists flashing into the red bearded brutal face. *It's a frame-up to get me into a fight,* Evans said to himself. *It's a fake t'draw me out. I won't interfere.*

BUT THE very presence of the red-bearded brute sent Evans' blood racing, as if compelled by a force stronger than himself, as he watched the one sided fight, his anger increased. Slabber finally managed to seize the boy in his powerful arms; he applied a crushing pressure until the boy's face became white and contorted with pain. There was no doubt about it now—this fight might be intended to draw Evans into it; but it certainly was no fake. Slabber's huge fists began to pound the boy in the face; Gorman watched and leered and out of his little greedy eyes he watched Evans. The boy went down writhing with pain on the floor. Slabber started to kick the prostrate form.

"That's enough Slabber," Evans leaped to his feet, his gun in his hand. "Put 'em up you gents. Reach!" He then turned to the bartender. "Get their guns," he ordered

The bartender stripped them of their gun-belts and felt for concealed weapons. Satisfied he piled them on the bar. "What yuh goin' t'do Jim?"

"Give this hombre some of his own medicine," Evans responded grimly as he handed the bartender his gun. "See that no one interferes!"

The huge Slabber scowled murderously and rushed at Evans, the huge hairy arms extended. Evans met the charge with a straight left with all of his hundred and ninty pounds behind it. It stopped the giant in his tracks and brought forth a curse from Gorman. Evans was quick to follow up his advantage. He shot his fists into the brutal face in front of him again and again. A straight right caught the giant on his bulbous nose and blood spurted; but the blows seemed to have little effect except to make the face look more horrible. Slabber tried again and again with wild haymaker swings which Evans easily evaded; this was easier than he had thought.

Then Evans slipped and was thrown off balance; one of those huge fists in its wild course connected with the side of his head and the impact knocked him flat. It seemed that it had almost lifted his head from his shoulders and for a space everything went black. Vaguely he could hear the bartender threatening Slabber but the big brute was heedless of interference. His

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STEEL WEST with SIXGUNS!

by Lee Floren

Hank Tarney had been trying to go straight, had served the railroad well. But the big-shots wouldn't keep a man with a prison record . . .

BEHIND Hank Tarney the kerosene lamps of the new railroad-town looked like fireflies; the hostler felt the push of the prairie-wind, and wondered if the wind ever stopped blowing here. These thoughts were broken as the work engine puffed closer, steam whistling around its drivers.

The engineer stepped from the cab, greasy and dusty from a day of swinging rails and cross-ties. "She's your engine, Hank."

"Anythin' wrong with her Smitty?"

"You might tighten up the left steam-chest head. Seems to me it leaks a little."

"I'll check it."

The engineer sighed as he looked at the lights of Newcomb town. "Another five miles of rails laid today, Hank."

The fireman had climbed down on the opposite side; now his dark form was moving toward Newcomb; they could hear his boots grind on gravel and ties.

"Well, so long, Hank."

"So long, Smitty."

Hank Tarney watched the engineer's bulk go into the night. Then he walked around the work-engine; he had had many jobs in his twenty-five years, but this was the job he liked best. He was happy; Molly was happy; and when the baby came in three months—

He climbed up into the cab, put his hand on the throttle. He liked the feel of the locomotive under him; it was a great, tireless horse. He backed out on the Y, made his turn, and then nosed the engine into the shed, where he would watch it and check it and grease it.

The drivers moved, slowly and ponderously. He slipped the engine into the shed and went down, after locking the hand-brake. The night was calm and warm; it reminded him of that other night, seven years before, down on the Pecos.

He had not known the Wild Gang had ridden into Durango to rob the bank. He had been eighteen and old enough to suspect something, too. But there had been gunflame and Shorty Haynes had been killed. And Jim Callahan and Bud Carr had been shot down and wounded.

Even Pete Kilrain, the Wild Gang leader had been captured.

Hank Tarney, realizing he had been tricked, had turned state's evidence; Jim Callahan, Bud Carr, Pete Kilrain had drawn life-sentences. He himself had served four years before being pardoned.

But a man's reputation, and a man's past, have a way of traveling ahead of him, coloring and spoiling his present; he drifted from job to job. He had told Molly about the Wild Gang, but she had wanted to marry him just the same; they had been man and wife for two years, and the shadow of that wild night kept them on the move.

HANK CLIMBED down off the cab and got a wrench. He was tightening a stud-bolt on the steam-chest when he heard the voice behind him say, "Hank Tarney."

He dropped the wrench, his fingers trembling. A man stood in the shadow of the shed, outlines barely discernible. Hank Tarney moved forward a step, still ice and fire inside, and his own voice sounded distant. "That you, Tony?"

A low chuckle. "This is Pete Kilrain, Hank. Damn it, you know my voice!"

The ice melted and ran out of Hank Tarney. The fire roared and died and was silent. The hostler wet his lips, but his tongue seemed strangely slow and almost without moisture. "What are you doin' here in Newcomb, Pete?"

"We got business."

Hank noticed that the outlaw leader said *we*. That meant, then, that Jim Callahan and Budd Carr rode with him. "What kinda business, Pete?"

Kilrain laughed again. "That's my lookout, Hank. You might know about it, later. I suppose you done heard me an' Bud an' Jim gunned our way outa the pen about three months ago."

"I hadn't heard."

"Well, we're here... and that Texas pen got a new warden the next week, we understand. They must've hired two new guards, too. I killed the warden."

Hank Tarney had come close to Pete Kilrain. He came too close and Kilrain gritted, "Keep your distance!" Hank Tarney stopped. Kilrain had his .45 out, and it was ugly and threatening. "I hold no grudge against you, Pete Kilrain; all I ask is that you let me and Molly be."

"I saw her this afternoon on the street. A bartender pointed her out to me. You picked a good-looker."

"That's no compliment...from you."

Again that low laugh. "Still the snuffy kid, huh? The kid who got on the stand and talked and talked and talked..."

Hank Tarney heard the click of the gun-hammer. He couldn't see through Pete Kilrain's plan. Did the outlaw-leader aim to shoot him down in cold blood? "You jobbed me, Pete. I was a dumb kid."

Pete Kilrain's voice quietened. "There's no use you tryin' to go straight, Hank; it can't be done. Me an' the boys have cooked up a good plan that'll bring us in some kale. We might count you in on it."

"I don't want no part of it."

Kilrain said, "You might," and Hank heard him move off into the night. Pete Kilrain was a cat—silent on his feet, swift with a gun. And inside Hank Tarney was a great sickness.

He had not asked Pete Kilrain how the Wild Gang had located him, Hank Tarney; that didn't make any difference now. Kilrain and Callahan and Carr had found him, and that was all that counted.

He'd been riding a trail, back then, and three riders had come up. They'd talked, and in Durango they had gotten down in front of the bank. "I'm a rancher out here in the breaks," Pete Kilrain had said. "Need some dinero for my payroll. You're hired as a hand of mine, kid; now hang onto our broncs while we go into the bank?"

"Sure."

Eighteen years old, broke, happy to get a job. And then the guns had started talking—Hank Tarney almost shuddered.

HANK SWEPT out the cab, wiped the engine. Dawn finally came.

Engineer Smitty said, "Well, another long day ahead." The fireman was silent as he followed Smitty into the cab.

Smitty leaned out the cab window and looked at Newcomb town. "Tomorrow night you'll not sleep, Newcomb. Payday and the dirt-crew'll be in."

Hank Tarney washed in the trough beside the yard-office. Superintendent Mike O'Dell and Clerk Ambrose Black had watched the work-engine leave. Then they had gone back into the yard-office. Tarney could hear the click of Black's key.

Hank Tarney combed his hair, squinting into the mirror against the unpainted wall. Molly would have coffee and hotcakes ready. He decided to tell her. No use in trying to hide it.

Clerk Black stuck his head out the window and said, "Superintendent O'Dell wants to see you, Hank."

Cold fear was a living shaft in Hank Tarney. Here it was again! Had Pete Kilrain told Superintendent O'Dell—? "When does he want to see me?"

"Right now, of course."

Black had a steady stare that, today, made Hank Tarney angry. He crossed Black's office and knocked at O'Dell's door.

"Come in."

O'Dell was a blocky man, with hairy forearms. He had worked his way up from hunky-boss on a section gang. A thick forefinger rested on a letter on his desk.

Hank Tarney asked, "You want to see me?" And his voice was not steady.

O'Dell cleared his throat. He leaned back in his chair. "Hank, I like you.

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Hank waited, hardly breathing.

"But good man or not, you've got to go."

Hank's heart felt like it had fallen into his stomach. He gulped, "Why?"

O'Dell leaned forward. "You didn't know it until now, but Northern Rails checks each employee, Hank. I got this letter during the night. You did time down in Texas."

WELL, THERE it was. Plain and open again, and it meant loading the wagon, and going over the prairie. Not so hard on him as it would be on Molly. "Yes, I did time. I don't suppose it would do me any good to tell you I was railroaded into that pen."

"I'm sorry, Hank." O'Dell got to his feet and shook hands. "I like you, as I said before; you're a good man. But I didn't make the rules for this railroad. I only work here myself and I have to obey rules."

"My money?"

"You'll get that tomorrow night, when the pay-train comes in." O'Dell called to Black. "Where is Number 4 now, Black?"

Black clicked his key. The key clicked back. Black said, "It'll be here on time. Nine fifteen, tomorrow night."

Hank Tarney walked outside, mouth with a wry taste. Fired again, eh. A man leaned against the office. He was squat and tough-looking; he looked at Hank Tarney, and Hank caught his ironic smile.

The squat man didn't speak.

Hank Tarney glanced at the open window of Clerk Black's office. That squat man had heard every word he and Black and O'Dell had said.

"Jim Callahan, huh?"

Callahan growled, "Don't get tough, punk."

Hank Tarney hit the Kilrain rider; he had to hit somebody. All his hate, his anger, were wrapped in that hard, bony fist that broke on Jim Callahan's jaw.

The blow drove Callahan back, but Hank knew that the longrider was still in the fight. Callahan was tough; he'd fallen on Durango's main-stem, six bul-

[*Turn To Page 86*]

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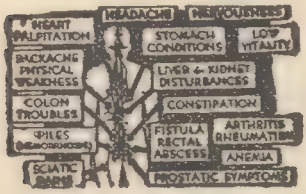

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let-holes in him—and lived to serve time. So Tarney followed in.

Callahan went against the building, steadied himself. He hit at Hank, and the first blow missed; the second caught, though. But with two nicely-placed chops, Hank Tarney knocked Jim Callahan down.

By this time Clerk Black and Superintendent O'Dell had come out of the yard-office. "What's wrong?" O'Dell demanded.

Hank Tarney's temper left him. He rubbed his hands together slowly. "Nothing at all," he said.

O'Dell sent him a questioning glance, then looked at Callahan. Clerk Black had a vacant stare. "Who are you, stranger?"

Callahan said, "To hell with you!" He gave Hank Tarney a silent long look, then turned and walked toward town.

O'Dell looked at Hank Tarney, heading for home, looked at Jim Callahan; he rubbed his thick nose. "I don't savvy this, Black..."

NEWCOMB was a combination tent-and-board city. Buildings could be taken down and moved ahead when the yard-office moved; saloons and gambling-dens followed the railroad and its payroll.

The town had no plank sidewalks; they would be too bulky to move. And Hank Tarney walked along the dusty path, hardly aware of where he was. Newcomb was silent this early in the morning; tomorrow night, when construction workers came in with pay, would be the town's big time.

Two men came out of the *Pasteboard Saloon*. Pete Kilrain was the same—lanky, hard of eye and face; Bud Carr limped a little—a Durango bullet had done that. They stopped and looked at Hank. He said, "I whipped Callahan back at the yard-office."

Kilrain shrugged. "That did you no good."

Bud Carr watched him, eyes steady.

Hank Tarney felt the tug of regret. Kilrain was right: he had accomplished nothing by slugging Jim Callahan. Hank Tarney turned to go. Kilrain and Carr watched him. Tarney turned the corner and looking back he saw Callahan come and join the two. He had made a tough enemy in Jim Callahan.

* * *

Molly said, "You're late, Hank."

Hank Tarney kissed her. The railroad cabin was warm, thick with the good smell of hotcakes and coffee. And Molly looked

pretty in her robe; he sat down and tried to eat.

All the time, his eyes kept running around the cabin. They'd have to pack, and that'd be hard on Molly; he'd have to do it all alone...this time.

"You're worried, Hank."

He smiled. "You just imagine that, Molly."

"I know you!"

There was fear in her voice; she was remembering how he had lost those other jobs. There was no use in trying to hide it any longer; he told her about getting fired.

She was silent for a second. Then, "I've been afraid of that."

"You married the wrong man, Molly."

"I don't think so..."

Hank kissed her and went to bed. Usually he dropped right off to sleep, but today sleep would not come. He got up at noon and shaved and went over town; he had not told his wife about the Wild Gang being in Newcomb.

* * *

Pete Kilrain said, "So the big boy canned you, huh?"

"Callahan tell you?"

"Heard it through the window."

Hank studied the outlaw-leader. "You got a lot of nerve, you three. There are murder-warrants out for you and yet you walk openly on these streets." He looked across the street. Bud Carr had limped out of the *Saddlerock Cafe*. Jim Callahan watched from the window of the *Lazy Ace*.

"Long ways to Texas, Hank."

"They found out about me."

Kilrain showed that slow smile. "You can't go straight, Hank; no use tryin', fella. It'll never work. Once a con, always a stripe-shirt; you can't outrun it."

Tarney was silent, face showing his pain.

"One more big job, Hank; then we pull for the Argentine an' we'll live like kings. We need another man, too. You get down there and then send for Molly."

Hank Tarney said, "I've thought of going to Mexico."

Kilrain made a flat movement. He looked at Bud Carr and Jim Callahan. "Mexico, hell! Sand and heat. Argentina, yes. Grass, cattle, water."

Hank Tarney watched the seamed face.

[*Turn Page*]

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WESTERN ACTION

"One more raid, Hank." The words were fine and sharp now. "And if you try to squeal on us to the local law one of us'll kill you!"

Hank Tarney stood silent, adding things. "The payroll, huh?"

Kilrain breathed, "That's it."

Suddenly Hank Tarney was wild inside. O'Dell had canned him, just because of a mistake, now long gone. The payroll was coming in. Kilrain was right. No use in trying to go straight, in working, in hoping; get the money and head for the Argentine...

But Molly?

"We need another man, bad..."

"I'll think it over."

"Better think fast."

Hank Tarney walked away. *He'd worked hard for the railroad and for that O'Dell had fired him.* He turned and came back.

"I'm your man, Kilrain."

* * *

He went back home and this time he went to sleep. The next day he explained to Molly he would push ahead alone and send money back to her. She would go to St. Louis to be with her mother when the baby was born.

"But Hank—" She had tears.

He was patient. They were here on the plains, far from medical aid, and in St. Louis... She came around to his point of view.

"But you won't be there when the baby is born, Hank."

"I'll see him—or her—later, Molly."

So the plans were made. Molly would board Number Four on its return trip. Hank felt better; some of the responsibility was off his shoulders. Now he had only to make one more mental compromise.

O'Dell had been good to him. They'd had long talks together many nights while Hank Tarney had tended the work-engine. But O'Dell was not the railroad; he was only an individual. You had to think beyond O'Dell, and remember the heartless core of a big corporation. And how that corporation wouldn't give an ex-convict a fighting chance.

That was it. Not O'Dell, but the railroad itself, with its fat directors, back in Chicago and New York. One payroll wouldn't mean much to them. They were the ones who made the rules. They were the hardheads who wouldn't give a man a chance....

PETE KILRAIN said, "Jim and Bud are out in the brush; we hit at Willow Bend on the river."

"Best place."

"Callahan boards back on Black Rock. Carr takes the engine-crew. You an' me'll be in the brush."

Hank nodded

"Now go down an' check on Number Four again. Make out like you're anxious to get your wages..."

O'Dell said, "It'll be on time, Hank; it always has been. I'll sell a ticket to you on jawbone. You can pay me when you get your money."

Black made out the ticket. Hank Tarney saw O'Dell take money from his own wallet and give it to Black for the ticket. Then O'Dell handed the ticket to Hank Tarney.

"I'll pay you back when I get my pay, Mr. O'Dell."

"All right, Hank."

Yes, O'Dell was all right. But the railroad—those big-wigs that made those rules— They'd pay. He'd get payment back to O'Dell. Nobody would ever tie him into the robbery. And ever if they did, he'd clear out; he'd mail back the price of the ticket to Superintendent O'Dell.

Once he glanced back. O'Dell stood in the doorway and watched him. That was queer. Later on that day he was talking with Pete Kilrain, talking just for a second, and O'Dell came out of the *Lazy Ace Saloon.* O'Dell gave him a sudden glance.

Then O'Dell looked away.

"He suspicious, Pete?"

Kilrain's laugh was low in his throat. "Don't jump at things, Hank; how could he be suspicious?"

He rode out of Newcomb at dusk. Molly was packing for her trip back home;

[*Turn Page*]

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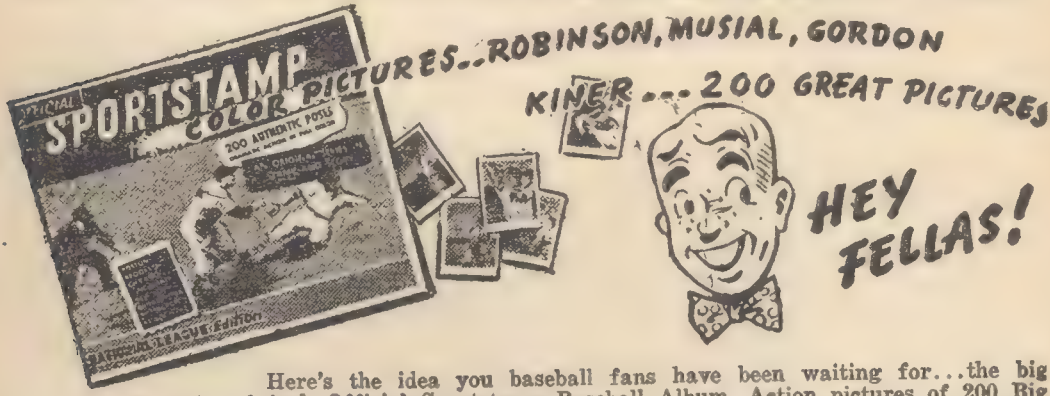

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she was both elated and unhappy. He would help rob the train, then swing back into town, and get Molly on the train for its return trip. He told her he was riding out to a cow-ranch looking for a job.

"I might get hired right off, Molly. If I do, I can't see you on the train. But you understand?"

"I sure do...Hank."

A man can be an awful liar at times. He can lie until he is ashamed of himself and his name and destiny. And Hank Tarney was thinking along these lines when he met Pete Kilrain on Willow Bend.

They squatted, silent. Behind them broncs stood, ready for the get-away. Time ran on and Kilrain said, "You hold the broncs, Hank."

"All right."

DUSK came and settled into darkness. Then the single headlight came, and the train ground to a halt. Kilrain went ahead, gun out, mask up. And Hank Tarney, heart leaden, waited, holding the reins. He heard men holler, then heard the throaty growl of a gun.

More guns talked.

Something had gone wrong. Now Pete Kilrain came running, with Jim Callahan a pace behind him. Kilrain had a sack—a bulky sack.

"They killed—Budd Carr..."

Callahan said, "That damn car—railroad bulls... Three of them, I saw. Yeah, an' that super—O'Dell—he was on it... Somebody squealed!"

Somewhere, a man in the brush, calling, hollering. Hank recognized O'Dell's voice.

"They went this way."

Hank Tarney had one boot in the stirrup. *Somebody squealed!*

They sat broncs, silent, tough, hard. Callahan had his gun out, but Kilrain had pouched his .45. Kilrain had the sack of money in front of him. And, in one brief second, Hank Tarney understood.

They had jobbed him again!

Callahan said, "Carr shot O'Dell. But I guess he never killed him. We'd better get out, Kilrain."

"Not until we finish with this bucko."

Something inside said, "*You've been wrong, Hank Tarney. You took the bigger of the two evils. O'Dell didn't want to can*

you; he was forced to. You took out your spite like a little kid. You could have told O'Dell about this raid, and he'd not stopped a bullet—"

Callahan's gun clicked.

"Kill him!" rasped Kilrain.

Callahan shot, and the bullet smashed into Hank Tarney's left thigh. It spilled him, a gigantic hand, smashing him down. But his own .45 was out. It lifted and vomited smoke.

Callahan's second shot missed. That was because he was sliding from saddle, shot through the head. Pete Kilrain's bronc was rearing, fighting the bit; Kilrain was burdened by the money-sack. But he shot once, too; and Hank Tarney shot once. Then Hank Tarney stood there, listening to O'Dell break through the brush.

"This way," Hank said.

O'Dell came in, puffing like a bull. "You got them both, huh, Hank. Good work. Now get on your bronc an' ride the hell out. See me in my office inside an hour, huh? Now ride out, fellow, before somebody comes and sees you."

"I don't git it."

"Hell, the railroad bulls have been expecting this. One of them recognized Pete Kilrain and this outfit, back on the Platte. That circular I got, sayin' you were an ex-con—it also described Kilrain and Carr and Callahan."

"You ain't taking me in, O'Dell?"

"Hell, no. Ever since yesterday, I've been watching you, Hank. I talked this over with Molly, too; we decided to see how strong you were, fellow."

A voice called, "Where you at, O'Dell? You got them?"

"This way, Jones. Got 'em both."

O'Dell said, quickly, "You came through, Hank. Molly an' me had faith in you, an' you pulled through on us. For a while, we thought you aimed to ride with this bunch—"

A hard lump filled Hank Tarney's throat. So Molly had known, and kept silent, and Mike O'Dell had known, and trusted him.

"Now get out, Hank. See me in my office, like I said; you go back to work."

"But the company rules—"

"Rules, hell. I'll wire back you're not the Hank Tarney the circular mentioned. Now get out, fast!"

Hank Tarney fed his bronc the rowels. He made a wild, mad ride toward Newcomb. He was warm inside, now.

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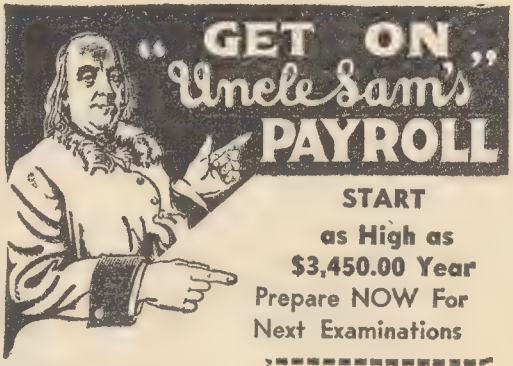

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[*Continued From Page 81*]

heavy boot struck Evans again and again in the ribs, in the back and in the face. *I've got to do something or he'll kill me,* Evans thought to himself as in a dream. *I've got to get up and fight him!*

"Stop it Slabber or I'll shoot," the bartender warned.

BUT EVEN the threat of a bullet did not stop the brutal kicking. Evans twisted his body suddenly and, in a wild, blind effort, managed to seize Slabber by the foot—throw the big man off balance. Blood was running into his eyes from a cut on his forehead. He put up his hand and wiped the blood from his eyes. He saw Slabber in a blur now, and struck out at that hideous face. Desperately he danced about seeking an opening and again the blood blinded him. Unable to see, he was soon in the arms of the giant.

The vise-like grip increased and then Evans knew what it was like to die of suffocation.

A blow to the big man's lower ribs finally loosened the grip a little; Evans brought up his knee and fell over backwards seizing the big man as he did so. That maneuver saved his life, for the fall knocked the wind out of Slabber. He lay gasping on the floor as Evans staggered to his feet and again wiped the blood from his eyes. "For Gawd's sake Evans, don't finish me. I've had enough, can't yuh see I've had enough?"

Evans stepped back waiting. "If yuh haven't got enough I'll give yuh some more; some difference fighting a man instead of a boy, eh?"

"Ha," roared Slabber as he rushed again, "the man don't live that can whip Jud Slabber!" He had extended his arms as he leaped. Evans sidestepped and lashed out at the bloody face before him; he realized then that he could beat the big man's face to a pulp, beat the eyes until they were swelled almost shut and it would not be enough. On guard the big man stood solid and those huge arms made him almost safe from blows to the face. Evans began to dance around. At last he had determined his one advantage; his long arms could get down under like a hook and rain blows to the body. He did not try to hit hard but fast and often.

Nothing is harder on the spirit to fight than body blows against which it is impossible to guard oneself, and Slabber was

[*Turn To Page 94*]

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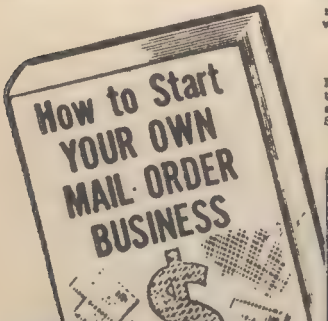

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soft around the middle. He had never trained himself to guard against such an attack; a mere motion toward his face and he would bring up his guard. Then that punishing fist would flick down to his solar plexis. His tongue stuck out; his face seemed to take on a bluish tinge; his breath came in choking painful gasps; his eyes seemed ready to pop from their sockets. Finally he gave up guarding his face entirely; he staggered and wobbled, left himself wide open for a punch to the jaw. Weak as it was it was enough.

AS SLABBER slumped to the floor in a heap, Gorman stepped forward and extended his hand. "You win Evans; let's call it all off and be friends. I'll give you a good price for your place. I need that water."

"You've got all the water yuh need Gorman," Evans said harshly. "I've been fair with you; I've let you have half of the flow from the Little Buffalo, my needs are not very great at present. My spread is small, what water I don't need I've turned over on your side."

"But you intend to grow bigger," Gorman reminded him. "The bigger you get the more water you'll need. Then there won't be enough for both of us."

"Yeah," Evans agreed. "I guess you're right; but remember this. The water *is* mine!"

"And I'm willin' to pay yuh for it; I'll give yuh a good price."

"Two thousand ain't a good price," Evans reminded him.

"Five thousand then."

"Those Indians knew what they was about when they turned the stream over on your side. Plenty of good land over there," Evans argued. "Valuable land and it will get more valuable as time goes on. My price is ten thousand."

"So yuh intend t'hold me up?"

"It's not a hold-up," Evans persisted. "I would have been willing to sell for five thousand if yuh'd come to me fair and square with that offer to start with; but yuh wanted it for nothin'. Yuh decided t'gun me down and it didn't work so yuh hired this—" he touched the prostrate form of Slattery contemptuously with his toe. "My price is ten thousand cash, you can take it or leave it."

"But you know I havn't got that kind of money," Gorman hedged.

"With what you've got as security yuh can get it at the bank. Or have they found yuh out too?"

"Listen Evans," Gorman stepped forward threateningly, "you can't win. There's a lot of things I could do if you continue to fight me. I can take all the water and then where will you be?"

"Yeah," Evans admitted angrily. "You could probably cut off all my water and post enough men up there to keep me from turning it back on. Yuh could come with a gang a-shootin' and a-burnin' and clean me out—and since yuh can't find a gun man t'beat me to the draw fair and square, yuh might even have me shot in the back. But remember this Gorman—people will know. You intend to stay here a long time. Maybe yuh'd better buy, it'll be safer."

"I've made yuh a fair offer," Gorman snapped. "Five thousand is tops and by golly yuh better sell! If yuh don't yuh won't be worth a nickle a year from now."

"Alright Gorman," Evans turned his back and stepped to the bar. "But remember, I got a trick or two up my sleeve, too; I worked in a mine yuh know?"

OUT OF the corner of his eye Evans watched Gorman; he saw the look of bewilderment and confusion change to fear. "What's workin' in a mine got to do with me?"

"Dynamite."

"My Gawd," Gorman blurted. "You'd take all my water; you'd blast the fill it took the Indians years to build! You couldn't do that Evans, you wouldn't. It just wouldn't be right. Why man, think what you'd do to me, my land would be ruined, my crops—my cattle."

"I got the shots all placed Gorman," he lied, but wished now that it wasn't a lie. "I got the shots all placed and I got a man posted in the hills watchin'. If yuh burn just one of my buildings or hay stacks, or if anything happens to me—"

"You're a man of your word Evans," Gorman's attitude changed from belligerence to suaviness. "How will I know that your man won't blast the fill even if I do buy."

"I'll let him know," Evans responded levelly. "And then, I always keep my promises."

"All right," Gorman responded agree-

[*Turn Page*]

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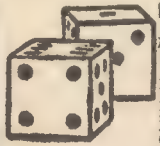

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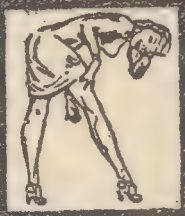

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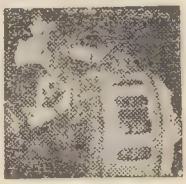

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ably now, "ten thousand dollars for your rocky scabby land and your water."

Reminded of his promise, Evans turned to the bartender who was bathing the face of the young man who had fought with Slattery. "He's been shot," the bartender informed him, "and he's bleedin'. He's the gent yuh was waitin' for—he's Ned Toller!"

"Get him to a Doctor and quick," Evans ordered. "I'll be over to see after him as soon as I've closed my deal with Gorman." He took his gun which was lying on the floor within easy reach of the bartender. "Keep their guns 'till I tell yuh."

GORMAN strode disgustedly across the bar room and picked up a wooden scrub pail half full of filthy water. He dumped it into Slabber's face. "Get up yuh big hog, get up and get out. You're fired!"

"Fired hell," Slabber growled. "Fired hell—I quit!"

"Good," Gorman responded cuttingly. "Good enough!" He handed Slabber a roll of bills. "Get out of town and stay out!" He turned to Evans. "Come on, let's get this deal settled!"

With the papers all properly signed and the ten thousand dollars safely deposited in the bank, Evans had an expansive feeling of good will. "We might as well let bygones be bygones Gorman," he grinned. "Come on over and have a drink on me."

"Ain't got time," Gorman said curtly. "Ain't got time," and he flung himself on his horse and raced madly out of town.

Evans flung down his cigarette into the dusty street and crushed it out with his foot. "Seems to be in a hell of a hurry," he muttered, a puzzled frown creasing his brow. "Wonder what's eatin' him?" He headed down the street toward the doctor's office. "Wonder what sort of trouble Ned Toller got into. Hope it ain't too bad. But whatever it was," he resolved, "I've got to help him. I promised." His heart was acting queerly and he quickened his stride. He was hoping to hear some word, some news of Dolly.

But Ned Toller was out of his head and talked only deleriously. His troubles Evans could only piece together with

garbled fragments and he listened with bated breath whenever Dolly's name was mentioned. Gradually he began to put the boy into a picture. It was a picture of a proud, sensitive, headstrong lad who loved his mother and sister dearly, yet opposed them constantly. He sobbed in agony at his mother's death; he cursed in self-reproach when he was unable to support his sister and she ran away with Frank Hemish, the gambler who did not openly acknowledge her as his wife.

"I'm takin' yuh outa this place Dolly," he gritted. "As long as yuh was married t'Frank it was none of my business but now he's dead. It's my responsibility. Sure I ain't got no money and I'm in debt but I got a way of gettin' plenty. A thousand dollars for one job. A fella named Gorman—" his voice trailed off into a mumble then he reared up angrily. "I tell you I'll shoot it out fair and square—what's this Evans to you anyhow? If I thought you was the kind to play around on your husband I'd choke yuh in an inch of your life. Tell me the truth—did you or didn't you? Well, it doesn't matter, all the more reason why I should gun him down, then too I'll get paid for it. Sure I'm drunk; I got a right t'get drunk if I want. Go ahead and shoot, it'll take more than that pea shooter t'stop me!"

TOWARD morning Ned Toller dropped off into a peaceful sleep. Evans dozed in his chair. With the dawn he awoke to see Ned looking at him. "You're Evans?"

"Yeah, Jim Evans. How did you know?"

"I don't know," the boy admitted. "I was a fool t'think I could gun yuh and crazy to fall for Gorman's line. That was Gorman with that big fella who picked the fight with me. Why did he pick the fight with me?"

"Thinkin' I'd take it up," Evans grinned.

"And yuh did," Ned smiled weakly. "Looks like your face was stepped on by a horse. Reckon he'd have killed me. I was weak and outa my head—I guess I couldn't have gone through with it."

"No," Evans agreed. "You ain't that kind. You're on the square like your sister and plenty of spunk. We could go places together Son and do well too."

"So Sis is on the level," Ned murmured thoughtfully. "Then you didn't—"

"No," Evans responded solemnly, "she was faithful to her husband even though she admitted that she loved me. You think she still loves me Ned?"

"Must do," Ned moved painfully, "so much she put a bullet in me when she thought I'd gun yuh down."

A grim little smile flitted around the corners of Evans' strong mouth. "Musta been an accident. She wanted t'bluff yuh."

"Maybe so," Ned admitted, "anyhow yuh can't tell about a woman with a gun, especially when they're excited and if Dolly makes up her mind—well, she's got iron in her soul Evans. No weakness like most women."

"That's what it'll take," Evans mused. "It takes tough fiber t'win in the west; but the three of us can win it, don't yuh think? I got enough money for a new start."

"That's what I want," Ned agreed eagery. "Just a chance to own a piece of land and—"

At that moment the bartender came in. "Mornin' Evans," he drawled but there was suppressed excitement in his voice. "Heard the news?"

"What news?" Evans looked at him keenly. "Must be important t'get yuh outa bed so early."

"Somebody burned your ranch yesterday, burned your barns, your house and your hay-stacks—burned 'em clean down to the ground!"

In his mind's eye Evans saw the destruction and it brought a momentary ache to his heart; part of his own dreams were in that ranch. Then it came to him why Gorman had left town in such a hurry. Gorman had ordered the burning of the ranch and had tried to get out there to stop it. He had arrived too late and his own men had burned the ranch not knowing it then belonged to their employer. "Well," Evans shrugged, "if yuh play with fire, yuh might get burnt."

THE END

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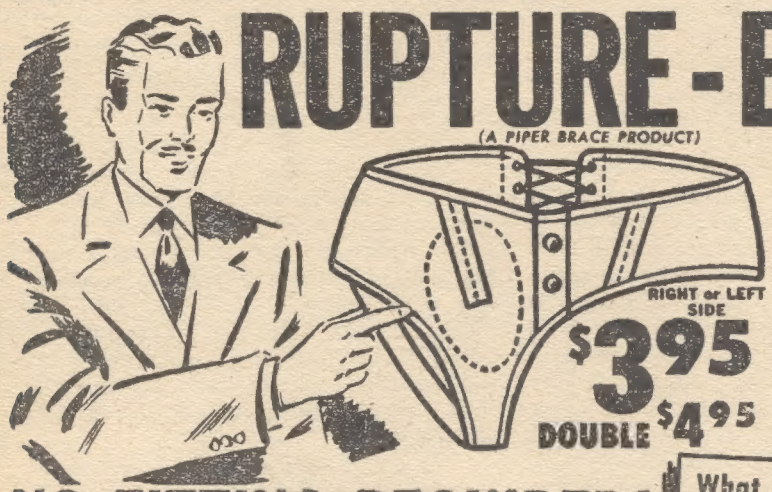

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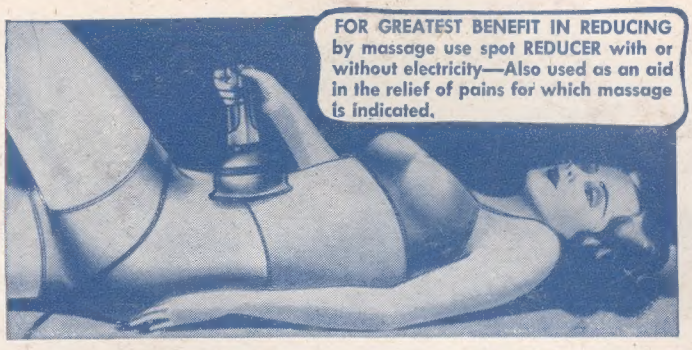

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